

A Conversation with John Kruth
by Frank Goodman (6/2007, Puremusic.com)

I usually try to keep interviews on the phone to 30-45 minutes. Some stars are so backed up with media that you're grateful to get 15 minutes, and lots of people who planned to give me 20 minutes end up spending 40, if we're having a good conversation. But once I started talking with my friend John Kruth, we didn't get off the phone for an hour and 20 minutes. He's incredibly entertaining and informative--a *lot* of stories, some even fit to print.

The man is a boundless repository of ideas and feelings, of history. He is a virtuoso mandolinist, and probably plays a handful of other instruments well. He writes strange and wonderful songs and has made quite a few records, solo and otherwise. He is a beatnik and a poet and a professor.

He is also a superb biographer, as his recent triumphant volume on the enigmatic and revered Townes Van Zandt, *To Live's To Fly*, reveals. (His maiden biographical voyage concerned Rahsaan Roland Kirk, called *Bright Moments*.) To write about Townes, and indeed, just to research the prayer-rugged subject, proved a delicate and difficult task, particularly because so many held Townes in protective esteem. Many of the travails and the travels are included between the covers of the volume that it took over 5 years to complete.

We take you now to Greenwich Village, to speak with a man for many cultures, musical styles, and far flung subjects of investigation and biography, John Kruth.

Puremusic: I really enjoyed the hell out of the book. What a very ambitious undertaking.

John Kruth: Thanks. I just couldn't understand why nobody had written a book about Townes. As you know, I'd written a book on Rahsaan Roland Kirk, I was done in 2000 with that. And the publisher that I was with at the time of course wanted another jazz book right away. But my goal or my ambition in writing the book about Rahsaan wasn't to be a jazz writer. I just happened to pick Rahsaan because I believe in his music, and I think everybody should know about it, and it had such a grand effect on people whether they know it or not, through Jethro Tull's Ian Anderson mimicking his flute style. But I was just looking for another figure in American music who, first of all, was below the radar. I wouldn't want to write a book on Neil Young or Bruce Springsteen, or something, somebody that we really know about and have heard about over and over. What's the point?

I've always really admired Townes, though I never saw him live, and I never met him. And maybe that's one of the reasons why I wrote a book about him. I don't think I could write a book about anybody that I knew or was close to, because I don't think you can have the perspective that you absolutely need--or that I need.

PM: Well, that's interesting. What does that mean, exactly? If it's somebody that you know, you don't have the perspective that you need. What is that perspective?

JK: Well, that's a really good question. I think that in order for me to write about somebody, I need to be as equanimous or as impartial as possible when I'm collecting all these stories. I mean, I'll laugh at them, I'll cry at them, from them, but at the same time, I have to be the one that's not attached. Everybody else is attached. Everybody is deeply attached to Rahsaan and to Townes. I mean, oh, my God, everyone I interviewed as far as Townes was concerned, was so deeply emotionally connected. People who'd just met Townes for ten minutes, or saw him play, felt like he was a close friend. He moved people that way.

PM: And in a lot of cases it seemed very enmeshed?

JK: Oh, really, exactly. And when people say, "Why did you write a book about Townes Van Zandt?" It's because I didn't know him, because I never saw him, because I wanted to hear about him, and I wanted to collect all those stories and put it all together. I knew the music. I consider it to be one of the few regrets that I have, that Jim Rooney invited me to the sessions for *At My Window*, and I did not attend.

PM: Really?

JK: Well, I knew Jim pretty well, and he was one of my big connections to Townes in the first place. And Rooney had invited me down for when John Prine was doing *German Afternoons*. And I wrote an article about John for *Musician* magazine, which was, at that time, *the mag*.

PM: Oh, yeah, for sure. A few of my close friends came from those days of that mag.

JK: I wrote an article on John at that point, and I was thinking about doing one on Townes at that time as well. And I think Bill Flanagan wrote it himself, because he wrote that great article that I quote in the book about Steve Earle and Townes Van Zandt.

PM: Exactly.

JK: But I was just in the midst of recording my first album at that point, and I was really focused on doing my own thing.

PM: Sure.

JK: Rahsaan lived down the street from me, maybe five miles away. I had no idea. Rahsaan Roland Kirk, sounds like a guy that came from the Sudan or something. Though I was really familiar with his music and I knew he was an American, I had no idea he was in East Orange, New Jersey, and that for a couple years of my schooling I was passing his

house. In the case of Townes, I picked up on him in about 1970, when I heard "Our Mother the Mountain," which just scared the hell out of me.

PM: Right.

JK: I had never heard a song like that before. It was like an Ingmar Bergman movie, or Tony Perkins in a cowboy hat. It was just so dark and simultaneously beautiful, that I had never experienced anything like that. I was hip to Leonard Cohen. I had heard "Violets of Dawn" by Eric Anderson. I was familiar with the tradition of writing darker, more poetic kind of statements. Obviously, Dylan, but Dylan didn't go to that neighborhood. Dylan was a different

PM: He had a different shade of darkness going on.

JK: Absolutely, completely. I mean, this was really a trip down to the flat fish territory of the human psyche. And mixed in, all these incredible poetic metaphors that went right back to Coleridge and Blake, and all the poets that I loved back in prep school. When I was made to go to prep school, that was my saving grace, that I learned "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" and I got onto William Blake, and the transcendentalists. And one of the things that completely moved me about Townes was that I had seen Lighting Hopkins and Reverend Gary Davis, and Mississippi John Hurt, and to me that was really what it was all about. And as far as poetry went, he was tapping into all the stuff that I loved, too. So I connected really deeply with him. I wasn't on to the Hank Williams thing at that point in my life yet. I was from New Jersey, I was a northeastern guy.

PM: But that was certainly to come.

JK: Oh, it was definitely to come. But at that point I hadn't heard it. But early on, when I heard that second album, when I heard *Our Mother the Mountain*, it just blew me away. I was familiar with Poppy Records, because they were doing some really interesting things. I mean, what a fine art label it was, even for all of its shortcomings commercially, it really put out a lot of people that I admired. And Townes was at the forefront of that.

PM: Right. So this was a project fraught with unusual difficulties, I imagine.

JK: Unbelievable. First of all, I had to sue the first publisher. That was incredible. I've never gone to court before in my life. And I had to sue my first publisher to get the rights to the book back.

PM: Why? What happened?

JK: Well, it's kind of a long story, and I don't know if it really fits for the interview, but I'll tell you about it. They only had the rights to the Rahsaan Roland Kirk book in English and in France but not the French language, but in France. So all English-speaking countries and France, but not in French. And then the guy went ahead and published-- sold the book to a Japanese publisher. And it came out in Japan. It was written up in the

Tokyo paper. It was selling for \$50 a copy, and I didn't know about it until a friend from Japan alerted me to the fact that, "Congratulations. I just saw the book out in Japanese, it looks beautiful." I was like, "Can you send me a copy of it?"

PM: Oh, it was in Japanese?

JK: Yeah. We're not talking about just sending a bunch of books over to Japan. No, it was sold to a publisher and translated--a very hip publisher, by the way, that also puts out William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac. So I was really--on one level, Frank, I was thrilled. On the other level I had just been ripped off.

PM: Oh yeah, I gots to get paid.

JK: Exactly. So I went to my publisher, and I told him, "Look, I know what's going on. I got this copy of this book in Japanese." And he was like, "I have no idea what you're talking about." And I said, "Just cut it out, and I will give you the 15 or 18 percent that I would pay an agent, and you'll give me the advance and the money that's due me." And he said, "Forget it. I didn't make enough money on this book in the States, so I had to do something to make some money with it." I said, "Yeah, but you don't have the rights to it."

Almost two years later, after he hemmed and hawed and postponed, it was over in court in like five minutes. The judge just took a look at the contract and said, "What is it that you don't understand about the contract that you drew up with your client?" And it was over. And now on June 1st I get the rights to the Rahsaan book back.

So what does this have to do with Townes? Well, I was supposed to sign a deal with that publisher, but there was this little like red light going on in my head, and I had no idea why. "Don't sign that contract." I just kept hearing myself tell myself, "Don't sign the contract." And he says to me, "Okay, look, I'll settle with you with the Rahsaan book as soon as you sign the contract with the Townes book." I'm like, "What is this, a dope deal? Am I a dope?"

PM: Right. [laughs]

JK: "Don't be ridiculous. Straighten that out, and then I'll consider signing the contract with you." And so, in the meantime, it was over. Da Capo took a look at it. Ben Schafer, who is a really cool guy and has been putting out a great series of books there, went for it, and I was thrilled. And I'm hoping they're going to do my next book. So that's the back story--that's just one of the little stories about this.

PM: Yeah, one of the difficulties it was fraught with.

JK: Yeah. I started the book right before--the summer before the towers came down. And I live about 20 blocks from the World Trade Center, and here I am collecting these stories about Townes. Some of them are hysterically funny, and some of it is the most

depressing stuff I've ever had a front-row seat to in my life. And the next thing I know the towers are coming down. So my mindset in going into this was just incredible.

PM: Bleak.

JK: Yeah, really bleak. Here I am listening to, like, "The Hole," [laughs] or "Kathleen," or "Our Mother the Mountain"--or you just pick 'em. And my own spirit is not of that nature. As Jerry Jeff Walker says in the book, he subscribes to Zorba the Greek, that you got to dance through the pain. And I'm of that ilk, I'm of that orientation.

PM: Definitely.

JK: And so here I am feeling this psychic anger of Townes, with all this pain and misery that he's going through that I'm ingesting, and that in the outer world is pure misery. I live on Bleecker Street, and all the cars are covered with dust. And people are walking around looking for their loved ones.

These were just the first difficulties, before I stepped into the pool of sharks, as I say in the intro.

PM: Yeah.

JK: Most of those sharks, I love them, too. It's just a box of broken cookies.

PM: [laughs]

JK: When you walk into somebody's life like that--when I wrote the book on Rahsaan Roland Kirk, there were people that begrudged me because I was from his New York clique of friends, that I wasn't from the Ohio clique of friends; or begrudged me because of my skin color, or that I lived in New York, or whatever it was. There's always something. And I figured when I went into writing this book on Townes--look, I've played Passim, I've played at Folk City. I've played at a lot these places. And I've worked with people that play at those places. So I figured, okay, I'm just kind of like revisiting a path that I've been on myself.

PM: Right.

JK: But then there are people who are holding me accountable for the war between the states.

PM: Oh, big time, because you're a Yankee. I've been at parties here in the south where a guy that I didn't know looked up at me from the punchbowl and said, "You know, you wouldn't have won if you hadn't have had so many more men." And I'm looking around, saying, "I'm sorry. Are you talking to me?"

JK: Yeah. "And here's the other thing: My grandparents were in Hungary and Russia at that time."

PM: Yeah, and mine were in Ireland.

JK: "So I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

[laughter]

JK: "Besides, hey, I live in New York, and you know that New York was secretly on the side of the south during the Civil War, as we call it here."

PM: Damn.

JK: But any time you walk into people's living rooms asking questions about their old friend or their old employer or their old lover, you're setting yourself up. And obviously, Guy Clark wanted to give me a transmission of what it was like when they were getting wild. And that's why I put it in the book.

What's really funny is that a lot of people think that Woody Allen is a schlemiel, that he's a total loser. Well, how does a loser like that make such great movies? If you allow yourselves to be cast as--I made the metaphor there of being Jimmy Stewart in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*. Well, I showed up in my Doc Martens and my weird plaid shorts, and started asking Guy Clark questions about his best and oldest friend, and the guy that really inspired him, and his mentor in many ways. And Guy's wife had a very close relationship with Townes that she didn't want to talk about. And I'll tell you something, the Texas Monthly took a shot at me in their review because I didn't mention for the first 35 pages that Townes had been a junkie. Well, he was a child first. He was a kid before he was a junkie.

PM: They wanted it in the first 30 pages.

JK: Yeah. In the first 30-35 pages I don't mention that he was a junkie, and they said in the review that I pussy-footed with who he was.

PM: "Write your own book."

JK: Well, no, here's the thing. I'm not going to write a book like--what was that guy's name? Albert Goldman, who wrote the John Lennon book?

PM: Yeah, it's not a tell-all.

JK: Well, even if it was, I don't have the stomach for it.

PM: Yeah.

JK: I have too much respect for, A) Townes, and B) his family. He's got a daughter and two sons. I mean, there's enough there that gives you the idea that, yes, he drank cough syrup, yes, he drank vodka, and yes, he shot heroin. He did all kinds of kinds of wild things.

PM: He did whatever there was.

JK: Yeah, so fine. That's not the point of writing the book. The point of writing the book is that I felt that Townes Van Zandt--and I wasn't alone--was one of the greatest songwriters in the latter half of the 20th century in the United States, and in the English language. To me, he was in the rarified atmosphere with Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen. And yes, he shot himself in the foot career-wise, and yes, a lot of his records were badly produced. And there were a lot of reasons why Townes wasn't a big star. As I think Paul K put it, it just took all of his energy just being Townes, just to write those songs and to play them. He's not a cartoon character like John Mellencamp or Bruce Springsteen, who fill up entire sport stadiums and they're larger than life. He sat there on a chair with his eyes closed and picked his songs, and you had to pay attention. You had to come to him.

PM: Right.

JK: I don't understand how we got so programmed to think that everybody has got to grow up to be a superstar.

PM: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, celebrity mania.

JK: The I-Ching says, "You don't just work for the time that you live in, you work for all time." And I think that guys like Nick Drake and guys like Townes Van Zandt--and there are many others out there that we don't even know about--they planted seeds.

PM: Yeah, by virtue of the fact that they may fly under the radar, we don't know about them.

JK: Right. They planted seeds, and those trees, or those plants, whatever it is, they blossom of their own accord.

PM: Right.

JK: And sometimes, like Rahsaan sometimes, like Townes, once the musician is gone and can't get in the way of their own career any longer, poof! Explosion! It's like they just start budding--these songs and albums start budding and exploding in everybody's consciousness.

PM: Yeah. So aside from the paper that gave you a hard time about those first 30 pages, are many of Townes' ardent followers pissed off about the book for one reason or another?

JK: Not too many. I think that you get the full spectrum on Amazon. I have people giving it one star and saying this is the worst piece of crap they've ever read in their life.

PM: Really? [laughs]

JK: And I got people giving it five stars, that it's absolutely brilliant.

PM: How about professional reviewers, how's it going?

JK: Really well. The only one that really took a shot at me and hurt was AP, the Associated Press printed this one review that probably got printed in about 200 papers or 250 papers. And it was just about the worst review of the book.

PM: Really? And what was their problem?

JK: I don't know. It's all subjective, isn't it?

PM: Right.

JK: It's all subjective, and it all has to do with reading comprehension.

PM: [laughs]

JK: I'm teaching at Manhattan College in New York, Rudy Giuliani's alma mater, and I have a feeling that some of my students have better reading comprehension than some of the people reviewing the books. Not everybody reads the whole book, you know that, when they review. And you bring to it whatever it is you experience. Your experience, and your point of view, and your focus or lack thereof. And I don't know, man--Marcel Duchamp put it perfectly, he said, "Let the little birds make pee-pee."

And this is the first book, and I'm sure--I think I've heard that there are two other people out there writing books. So let the party begin. It's like, look, I did it because I love the man's music. I couldn't believe I've been talking about his music to people for all these years. It was like Rahsaan; maybe if I write a book about him I won't have to talk about him anymore. Same thing with Townes, if I write this book on Townes--

PM: I'll get it out of my system.

JK: They wanted me to write another jazz book. I didn't want to write a jazz book. I needed to find somebody to fill the same size-thirteens that Rahsaan wore. I mean, a legendary, incredible American figure, a contemporary figure in American music that musicians know is great, but the public is still sleeping on, for whatever reason. And there's Townes Van Zandt. I didn't have to twist anybody's arm for them to go off and say what an incredible songwriter he was, and how good his voice was, and this and that. And yeah, a lot of people were upset with the way his records were either handled or produced, or distributed. And that played a part in why his career never took off. But he

also would do things like go to the Colorado mountains for the summer, and he didn't have a cell phone, so you couldn't reach him.

PM: The whole cast of characters seems given to wild excess.

JK: Absolutely. And that's the other thing that I just love about some of the reviews, where they'll take a shot at my chronology, or they'll take a shot that there wasn't enough research, or something like that. I'm talking to people who were alcoholics and cocaine addicts and heroin addicts, and just plain crazy pot smoking hippies from the '60s.

PM: Right.

JK: And it's like if somebody came and started asking me about like some of the tours I did with the Violent Femmes or the Meat Puppets. "What, are you kidding? I mean, it was a blur, man. It was just nothing but a blur." Even some of my own tours have been nothing but a blur.

PM: Absolutely.

JK: But I just love talking with people who go off on it. Go out and talk to these people and see if you can construct a sentence. Are there holes in Swiss cheese? Yes, there are. But that book came in almost 100 pages longer than it is--about 70 to 75 pages, maybe, longer than it is. And that partially has to do with the fact that the publisher is thinking, well, you want to keep the price down, and you want to keep it not much over 300 pages, because most people won't dedicate that kind of time. I mean, you'll have to talk to Clay Eals and his 800-page book about Steve Goodman.

PM: Wow.

JK: Do you know about that?

PM: No.

JK: [laughs] Yeah, there's an 800-page book on Steve Goodman coming out, with something like 350 or 400 photographs of Steve in the book.

PM: Who wants to look at 350 pictures of Steve Goodman? Sure, I like his music, but come on.

JK: Right. It's incredible. But I've got to hand it to his publisher for going the distance. I hear that it costs five dollars just to mail the book.

[laughter]

JK: So you can never capture--maybe Clay did with his book--but for the most part, you can't capture somebody's whole life in a book.

PM: Right.

JK: You can try. But I just sort of felt like, well, here, nobody was doing this. Let's get something out on Townes. And I focused on the stuff that I felt was important in getting out there.

PM: The music.

JK: The music, number one; I focused absolutely on the music, and what went behind making those songs.

PM: It's a music-centric biography.

JK: Absolutely. And there are people who are going to be upset that I didn't speak to this person, or I didn't talk to that person. But usually I draw the line after about 100 or 125 interviews.

PM: Yeah. Call me old-fashioned.

[laughter]

PM: I'll ask just a few more Townes questions, if you don't mind.

JK: Sure.

PM: You interviewed so many fascinating people in your search for Townes. Do any of the interviews stand out to you as particularly surprising or particularly touching in some way?

JK: Well, my favorite guy that I didn't expect--I mean, I had no idea who this was, but Townes called him his guru--was a guy named Darryl Harris.

PM: Right.

JK: Darryl--he's a guy that's living below the radar, living in one of those little cottages that they have in Austin. He's not a musician. I mean, years ago he used to play flamenco guitar, but he was a flamenco guitarist and a dishwasher at the same time. And I said to him, "Well, doesn't that destroy your calluses?"

PM: Yeah, right.

JK: But he was such a soulful cat. And he was just a real joy to hang out with, because some of the people you figure you kind of got an idea of when you're walking in the door, "Okay, this was Townes' guitarist," and you've heard him on records, or you've heard about him from other people. With Darryl I didn't really know much about him. But he

was very close to Townes when Townes was a college student and dropped out of college and first started playing his early gigs. And he was just a joy. So that was one guy for sure.

PM: So did Darryl remain a friend of his throughout his life?

JK: I think so, yeah. The thing about Townes is that unless the drama got too much, a lot of people seemed to remain his friends, even through the crazy ride. But I want to say also that Griff Luneberg from the Cactus Cafe, that was an extremely touching and intense moment there where we sat in the bar after it was closed. And that's a great club, first of all.

PM: It's an incredible club.

JK: Right. And we just sat there with the lights down in the club. At that point I sort of felt like I was in a movie *Citizen Kane*, you know, in the very beginning when the guy is interviewing the woman. It was just so intense. I mean, there were a number of times where I felt like maybe I should find a different line of work, just because people would put you through whatever their trip was, and sometimes it wasn't all that pleasant. But at the same point, going down that road with Griff--a lot of people say, "Why don't you make movies? John, your books are like movies. Why don't you film these people while you're interviewing?" But you would never get an interview. Like some of the interviews that I got with Jeanene, when I was talking to Jeanene and we're over at the old cabin Bayou Self and she's showing me the cabin, showing me the room and the bed where he died. And we're talking outside and she's just talking to the sky, she's just talking to Townes. You wouldn't get that in a movie. No one is going to give that to you. And even if they tried to give it to you, they're going to be very self-conscious about it--"how does my hair look"--while they're crying. You know?

PM: Yeah.

JK: You're not going to get that in a film. So I mean, when we went over to Bayou Self, when Jeanene took me over to the cabin where Townes lived and died, and like I said, showed me the room, and we just--she gave me an old pair of salt shakers that he had picked up on the road. It was incredible.

And Rodney Crowell was a good guy. I really enjoyed my time with Rodney Crowell. He was one of the more sane guys in the bunch.

PM: Right, yeah, he's a very sane character.

JK: Yeah, I had a great time with Rodney. And he told me some really wild stories, and he didn't put me through the ringer.

PM: Right.

JK: I mean, I still like Guy, even though he put me through the--I didn't take that stuff personally. Any guy coming from New York and asking questions about--he would have gladly put anybody through that trip. I kind of admired him for it in a way, because he was giving me what the Buddhists call a transmission. He was putting me right there, right smack in the middle of their insanity and their craziness, and I got the flavor and I got the feel, and I got the initiation.

PM: Right.

JK: That's what it was. And it took me all these interviews, Frank, for me to just figure out what it was.

PM: That's what it was. It was a sandal in the face. You got slapped across the face with a sandal by the Zen master, yeah.

JK: Right. What's the big deal? That's part of the education.

[laughter]

JK: So Steve Earle--there's a woman in there named Lysi Moore. And Lysi was Richard Dobson's old lady back in that day. And she said the way that they treated Steve Earle gave him the incentive for becoming this great songwriter.

PM: Right. Had to be the kid to become the Man.

JK: Guy was up front. He just said, "I'm going to slit your throat and drink your blood like wine." That was an old Townes line he was putting on me. Look, Townes held Skinny Dennis down on the ground with a broken bottle up against his throat.

PM: Yeah, it's just the way these cats rolled.

JK: Exactly. They played hard. They played hardball. So that was just part of the experience. There was one more that just slipped away that I wanted to tell you about. But those were some real key moments for me in doing the interviews, for sure. And it's unfortunate that a lot of people hate Jeanene, and they don't even know what she's really like. They hate her because she tried to straighten out his business. She comes on strong. She's like Sandy Duncan with an AK-47, man.

PM: Right.

JK: She's a little pixie with an AK-47. And she happened to like the way that I wrote, and the way that I talked about Townes. And she understood what my mission was, I think pretty well, from the beginning. And Kevin Eggers...I had already worked for Kevin Eggers before I met Jeanene. So I mean, it's a crazy, crazy mixed up scene. And hey, maybe it's one of the reasons why Townes was drinking so much, I don't know.

PM: Did you find with this tough Texas crowd that not only being a Yankee but a New York City journalist was like an ever-recurring hurdle on the track?

JK: Yeah, pretty much. But also being a musician broke down an awful lot of barriers. I thought that maybe that would have broke down a wall with me and Guy. But you know what happened in the book, because he comes downstairs, and I'm playing his guitar, and he's like, "All right. So now you're a musician." It's like, "Hey, I've been a musician all my life, man."

PM: Oh, no, I understand. Guy was the toughest interview I ever did--of all the hundreds of interviews I've done, he was the hardest and the least gratifying, really.

JK: Yeah. Well, I can't say that it wasn't gratifying in a sick way.

[laughter]

JK: I knew that I got a story. When you're a journalist, when you're writing, you want a story.

PM: Yeah, you can't get *the* story about Townes without talking to Guy Clark, no way.

JK: Yeah, so those are the ones that come to mind. Fran, his first wife, was a fantastic interview. And J.T. and I became pretty good friends, though J.T. is always a guarded character--because so many people have attached themselves to Townes, to try to get famous through him. And he's got his own relationship with his father, and I tried to respect that as much as possible in the book. And I think that J.T. actually comes off as one of the few real voices of reason in the book. I would say that Darryl Harris and Rodney Crowell and J.T. were like the most reasonable voices in the book--and Fran, his first wife. Other than that, I think most people were too emotionally invested in Townes one way or the other.

So it's been great. It's been opening more doors for me as a writer. I've got a couple different projects that I'm working on right now. But I'm absolutely positive it's not going to be another biography, that's for sure.

PM: How long did this one take to write?

JK: Well, I started it right when the towers came down. I'd say it took about five years. But I did quit at one point because I was just too fed up. I was fed up with dealing with all these crazy people.

PM: I can believe it.

JK: I got to tell you that I met some really wonderful people. And look, I enjoy hanging out with the crazies, too. It makes a good story. But at the same point--and I didn't have an advance, I just did this out of my own pocket, driving down to Austin, and down to

Nashville, a couple of times for each, at least. And I loved how one of the reviewers said if I'd ever spent any time in Texas then at least I'd know what I was talking about. But maybe they don't consider Austin to be Texas. I don't know. But I sure did spend some time down in Houston, too--and Galveston, that was great. I went to Rex's annual--

PM: The wake.

JK: Right, the wake. I was doing this all out of my own pocket. I had no advance on the book. So at one point I just sort of had to quit and go back to just getting my life together, because it takes over your life. You mortgage your life for a project like that.

PM: For instance, since readers have no way to know, describe a little what else was going on in your life as you worked on this book. I mean, you had jobs, you had gigs, you made records--

JK: Well, my mother died while I was making this book, too. And that was a plane crash in slow motion; over a four-year period, I was taking care of my mother. So it was a very bizarre time around the time of 9/11, because my mom was dying, the towers came down, I'm listening to Townes. [laughs]

Townes had a fantastic sense of humor; I love what Eric Anderson says in there about how when a new Leonard Cohen record would come out, they would sit down and listen to it together. And like Rolling Stone used to judge new albums with up to five stars, they would give this song or that song ten razor blades. I love that. It's like the only way to be able to fight the darkness is with that kind of humor.

So yeah, my mother died in that time period. I started teaching school. And on top of it, of course, I'm making records and going out and gigging as much as I can, trying to keep that aspect alive. And touring is not what it used to be. The club scene is so tough--CBGBs is gone in New York, the Bottom Line is gone in New York. Tonic just closed. Gas costs more than ever. And old clubs close. If you don't go out and play a city for five years, nobody remembers who the hell you are.

PM: Yeah.

JK: So I mean, I'm working on my ninth album right now. My eighth album just came out in December of 2006, and right before the book came out in March 2007.

PM: It's a shame that that eighth release, which I want to talk about now, probably got somewhat eclipsed by the book.

JK: It really did. I mean, that happened once before, years ago, when the Rahsaan book came out, I had an album called *Last Year Was a Great Day*, which Gadfly Records put out. And yeah, I got schmeered. It was like all the attention went to the book because it's a much larger work, and a more important work, and Rahsaan is infinitely better known

than I am. It might appear at the bottom of the piece--"by the way, John Kruth has a new CD out." [laughs]

Here's the thing, Frank--in 1995 I wound up in intensive care with tubes coming in and out of my body, and I had a hyper thyroid. And I was laying in the ICU for five days. I went down to 118 pounds, and I laid there. And I said to the universe, "Okay, here's my deal. I will no longer just be the curator of the John Kruth museum. If I can live through this, I will serve others."

And I've been serving others ever since. I still keep my own thing going, but I've been serving others ever since.

PM: Ahh.

JK: And that was my deal with the universe, because I wasn't so sure I was getting out of the ICU in 1995 there.

PM: Well, that was a good deal to cut.

JK: It just seemed like that was what came to me at that point, was that I had to start serving others instead of being--let's face it, some of us artists can be rather self centered.

PM: Exactly. And when you run into artists that are not, it's truly amazing, because it's not just a characteristic, it's a huge problem among artists, megalomania.

JK: Oh, yeah.

PM: It's the thing that makes big people small.

JK: Beautifully put. Another thing I want to mention, too, is Imagine No Handguns, which started back in Milwaukee with a transplant to Nashville for many years. And your Nashville readers will know all about this.

PM: John Sieger, sure.

JK: John Sieger and I used to play at Imagine No Handguns in the very beginning when it first started in Milwaukee. I mean, I had been held up at gunpoint right around the same time. I think what happened was that Sieger's neighbor's son was playing with a gun and shot his brother. And I think that's how it all began. But I was asked to play at the first one. And then when I moved back to New York in '96, and I eventually became friends with Bob Holman over at the Bowery Poetry Club, he asked me if I had any ideas for big shows. And I said, "Yeah, this is what we used to do in Milwaukee." So I think around 2001, that was the first one that I did in New York. I started doing Imagine No Handguns, producing shows to raise money for our fair city, to try to get rid of a couple of pistols and raise a little consciousness.

PM: Yeah, that's a city of a few pistols.

JK: Yeah. And I've had some really wonderful people involved in it, all down the line-- Mark Ribot and Steve Ture, the jazz trombone player, and Lenny Kaye, and Gordon Gano from Violent Femmes, and Steve Bernstein the great trumpet player. I'd have to go back and look at the list, but it's really been something.

PM: Absolutely, yeah.

JK: So I've been doing that one. I found that, in order for me to pay my rent on the plant now, my deal with the universe is that I'm not just going to make John Kruth records and write John Kruth stories and write my poetry and stuff. That's where I really started to feel like I have to start working on a grander scale. And I am an educator, I am a teacher. And at gigs for years I've always talked about Roland Kirk or Bill Monroe or Townes Van Zandt. So this is just another step in all of that.

PM: Before we talk a little bit more about the book, I want to cover the eighth album that's been out, and the one to come.

JK: *Eva Destruction*.

PM: Right.

JK: Eva was a waitress in Milwaukee. I used to call her Eva Destruction because she just broke so many guys' hearts. I mean, sometimes you would go to the restaurant just to see what she was wearing--if you were hungry or not, it didn't matter. It was just to go check out Eva. So here's the funny thing--and this ties right back to when I was in the hospital--because the basic tracks for *Eva* were all cut in 1995, right after I got out of the hospital. I wasn't sure how long I was going to stick around for. I was in ICU for five days, and then I was recovering at home for three months.

PM: Ouch.

JK: And as soon as I could really stand up and physically had the strength to start playing again, I went back in the studio and cut eight or nine songs. And then I moved up to San Francisco, where I basically recuperated, and started a band with [violinist] Jonathan Segel and [bassist] Victor Krummenacher from Camper Van Beethoven.

PM: Right.

JK: We were called the Electric Chairmen, and we had one album. So I left the tracks in Milwaukee. And over a ten-year period of going there and playing gigs, I'd lay down some extra tracks. And maybe a member of the Violent Femmes or Die Kreuzen, or Plasticland, whoever happened to be in that area, from that area, would come by and lay down some tracks. And Paul Kneevers, he saw this thing through over this time period. I never saw an album there. In fact, I even re-recorded one of those songs on one of my

later albums, because I just didn't know that that was ever going to turn into an album. And this guy, he worked it, he nursed it, he made it happen. And then a year ago January he called me and he said, "I think we got an album here. You should come out, lay down a couple more tracks, and let's mix this thing."

PM: Wow.

JK: And I went out there, and I mean, Frank, it was like this: One day I'm laying on the couch and I'm listening to these mixes, and Marylyn walks in. And she's listening to the album for a second, and she goes, "Who is this?" And I said, "Who do you think it is?" She goes, "It sounds like you." I said, "It is me." She's like, "When did you cut this?" And I told her the story of it. And she said, "This is really good!" And I was like, "Yeah, I think we're going to make a record." And then he goes to Crustacean Records, which is a hardcore label that puts out like the Crucifux and Killdozer, and plays it for them, and they love it. So I'm on a hardcore label from Madison, Wisconsin, called Crustacean. [laughs]

PM: Is this the album you described as psychedelic gypsy grunge?

JK: Yeah.

PM: Wow.

JK: I mean, there's a lot of stuff on there--like there's a song called "Goudla's Gypsy Dance." Over the years, I mean, way back in the late '80s when I was playing in the Midwest all the time, my band used to do gypsy dances to get everybody going. We used to play these like really wild gypsy dances. And I would play my Gibson A mandolin through a fess box and grind it up. I mean, that was always a big part of my sound was an eastern European kind of gypsy Jewish, whatever-it-is, folk dance kind of thing. I did a version years ago on my record when I was on Flying Fish, *Banshee Mandolin* has a version of "Over Under Sideways Down" that was totally a gypsy dance. So that element has always been there. But what happened on this record is that Paul just really gave it a certain edge that I loved. I would have liked to have done that on my own, but he did it. And then we just put the band together that was on that album, and did a tour around the Midwest a few months ago after the album came out, and it was fantastic. So the band I'm playing with right now is harder than any band I've ever played with in my life--which, by the way, my sweetheart Marylyn was like, "Hey, you're over 50, if you don't rock now, you might as well forget it."

[laughter]

PM: So what about this album that you're working on now? What is that?

JK: In a way it's--well, Marylyn's family is Croatian, and we go to Croatia every summer. And her uncle is the zookeeper of Split.

PM: The zookeeper of what?

JK: Split, that's the name of the town that we go to.

PM: How do you spell that?

JK: Like split, daddy-o.

PM: [laughs]

JK: The new album is called *Splitsville*.

PM: [laughs]

JK: And Split is this absolutely beautiful little city right on the Adriatic coast.
[<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Split>]

PM: Wow.

JK: And the Diocletian Palace is there. And Diocletian was a Roman emperor who was an exile in Croatia. And he built a palace there. In fact, the cover photograph of the album was taken in 1968--this might be too much information, I don't know--but the album cover photograph was taken in 1968. If you remember, there were riots busting out everywhere, in Newark--and it was the year that Martin Luther King was shot, there were riots all over America. The tanks were pulling into Prague. There were riots in France. And a guy named Pave Dulcic was a conceptual artist. He was like an avant-garde conceptual artist in Split at the time. And his response to everything was to go paint the Diocletian Palace Square red in the middle of the night.

PM: Wow.

JK: So he and a couple of friends, with a couple of bottles of wine and a couple of gallons of paint went and painted the Square red. And what happened, of course, is that this was Yugoslavia, under Tito, and so they came and they dragged him away, and they beat him with clubs, and they locked him up in jail, and by the time they released him he was never the same. And he died soon of that. And I wrote a very Billy Bragg electric proletariat rock song, "The Ballad of Pave Dulcic," and I recorded it there last summer, along with a handful of other songs. All of the songs are about Croatia, or inspired by Croatia on one level or another. And there are 15 songs, from very sweet, gentle, eastern European waltzes, to a very Tom Waits-ian kind of song about "I Got A Bottle Of Rockia," and rockia is like homemade moonshine. So there's all kinds of stuff on there. I'm just actually finishing it up now. Two members of Camper Van, my old pals, Victor Krummenacher and Jonathan Segel have done some overdubs on it, along with Matt Darriau from the Klezmatics playing clarinet and bagpipe.

PM: And will this come out also on the Crustacean label?

JK: Probably, most likely. I was just talking with them today, but it's going to come out in Croatia first this summer. We're just finishing it up, and I'm going to go over to Croatia. And boy, I don't even know how to spell Mestrovic's name for you. There was a famous sculptor there, his name was Mestrovic--I could ask Marylyn--I could send you the spelling. But I'm going to play a concert at Mestrovic's Villa, which is right on the Adriatic. It is so gorgeous. And Mestrovic is like the most famous sculptor of the--well, one of two or three of the most famous sculptors of the 20th century that came out of Yugoslavia. So there's this incredible villa right by the Adriatic. And I'm going to play a concert there, and we're going to have a CD release party. And Croatia Records is going to distribute it around Eastern Europe for me.

PM: Unbelievable.

JK: Yeah. And I've worked with some Bosnian gypsies over there. And the guitar player, I could send you his name. I can't remember it off the top of my head. He was in Metak, who were like the Led Zeppelin of Eastern Europe. This guy is like the Jimmy Page of Yugoslavia. He just came in tenth in a world competition for finger-style guitar. And he came down--the guy who produced the album, his name is simple, his name is Pipo. He is like the folk rock producer of Croatia. He produces a guy named Oliver. And Oliver is huge, enormous. Oliver is like Bob Dylan and what's his name, Neil Diamond, rolled into one.

And then there's another guy named Giobanni. Giobanni was the lead singer of Metak and guys from Sting's band play with him. He's kind of like somewhere between Robert Plant and Sting, or something, of Eastern Europe. So he's the guy that produced my session for me. And he brought in this guitar player. He said, "Don't worry, you don't have to pay him. He doesn't need any money. He just lives out on an island by himself, and he has money, and he'll only play on the album if he likes the music." And he came in and he kind of looked around with his face like "hmmm," like he wasn't too impressed with anything. Then he started to listen to the songs, and he told me that nobody wrote those kind of songs in Croatia. And he said, "I'll play on the record."

[laughter]

JK: So it was a really interesting experience, because I could hardly speak to these guys. They didn't know English very well at all. In fact, an engineer almost erased a great track because he couldn't understand what I was telling him.

PM: Wow.

JK: So it was really a wild way to work. And now I'm just going to finish up those tracks, and I'm pretty sure Crustacean is going to put out the Croatian album, which is called *Splitsville*. There's a song on there called "The Lone Croatian General." I met this one general that was the only general that was not called in by the Hague. And that's his

story. I told his story on the album. And it was just with the banjo. And they had never seen a banjo before. They had maybe heard one once.

But it's really an odd mixture of Croatian imagery and poetry--all the lyrics are all like inspired by Croatia. And most of the music--the music is either American country Appalachian kind of style, like Appalachian kind of folk, very simple, on banjo and mandolin, because that's what I had with me, that's what I was traveling with. Or it's highly eastern European kind of Italian Greek, Jewish, Croatian, of that geographical spirit.

PM: Wow.

JK: So that's what's happening. [laughs] In the midst of all that I went to India.

PM: Whoa.

JK: And I studied Carnatic mandolin.

PM: What does that mean?

JK: There are two forms of music in Indian traditional music. There's Hindustani, which most of us are aware of, like Ravi Shankar.

PM: Right.

JK: But in South India they don't play Hindustani music, they play Carnatic music.

PM: I've heard South Indian music, but I've never heard it called Carnatic before.

JK: It's sometimes spelled with a "k," most often spelled with a "c." But Carnatic is based on the spiritual music of the 16th and 17th century. And they're almost like what you would consider to be like their versions of gospel songs and hymns. But they also use the Raga, have a lot of very similar approaches, but the pieces are much shorter. They're like five, seven, eight minutes long. They're not a half hour long, they're not in three or four different steps or phases. So I went there and played with U. Rajesh, who I can actually send you a picture of, me and Rajesh. You know flickr.com?

PM: Uh-huh.

JK: You go to flickr.com and put in "John Kruth." And his name is U. Rajesh. And you'll see a picture of myself and Rajesh together in India, with his band. I played one concert with Rajesh, who was spectacular. I mean, he is the younger brother of Shrinivas who plays with John McLaughlin in the new Shakti. And Shrinivas is--as he was known, the adorable child prodigy. He is a world class mandolin player who is a classical musician, and absolute virtuoso. And Rajesh plays with Shrinivas.
[<http://flickr.com/photos/7362512@N03/423329344>]

PM: Right.

JK: They have a little school there. I didn't go to their school, I studied with a percussion master. And then I played one concert with Rajesh, and it was unbelievable. It was just incredible, because it was like going jogging with a guy from Kenya.

PM: Yeah, right.

JK: The first mile he's polite and smiling at you and everything, and after that you can't even remember what he looked like.

PM: He's got to get going, yeah, right.

[laughter]

JK: Yeah, he's got to get going. "That's great, thank you. I've got to get going." Like playing tennis with Agassi. If you can return the ball, you hope that you don't break your wrist.

[laughter]

JK: So he was very gracious. And I played this gig with him. And here's the funny part: We had this tremendous rhythm section of three Indian drummers, tabla and redondum, and I forget the name of the other drum. But we had this tremendous rhythm section. And at one point, which was--I've kind of taken a shot here, because even though there's improvisation in the music, I was a guest, and I didn't know if it was really called for or anything, but I reached in my pocket and I pulled out my harmonica--

PM: [laughs]

JK: --and right in the middle of this incredible drum solo that they were playing I started chugging a train beat--

PM: Oh, my God.

JK: --and people went wild. So two weeks of practicing every day, five to six, seven, eight hours a day--between five and eight hours a day on my mandolin made absolutely no difference. Pulling a harmonica out of my pocket and playing a little bit of a train rhythm that I've been playing since I'm 16 years old--

PM: Yeah, there's a moral to that story.

JK: These guys are incredibly spectacular musicians. So that's my wild world, Frank, cowboy and Indian music.

[laughter]

JK: I love them all--and some Croatian thrown in the middle.

PM: Well, I guess that's what makes you John Kruth.

JK: I guess so.

PM: You're a very global character. So are you doing or planning any book tours, readings and such?

JK: Oh, I did a whole bunch of them already. But I want to come to Nashville, and I want to go to Austin. But I've been teaching at the University, yesterday was my last day. I took off two weeks, and I did a simultaneous gig and book tour around the Midwest. But that didn't help out in Nashville, and it doesn't help out in Austin.

PM: And Nashville would be a good market for your book.

JK: Oh, I'm sure it is a good market. I really want to do it, I'm just trying to figure out when. I just got off now, and then I have a two-week summer school class that I'm teaching, and I can't leave that. And then I'm going back to the Midwest to play some more gigs and to mix the new record. And then I'm going to Croatia and playing in Croatia. So I don't get back until August. And maybe the very beginning of September or something I could come down there, which I'd love to. I want to go down the eastern coast and do Philly, Baltimore, DC, and then cut over to Nashville. And I've had phone calls, people asking me to come to Atlanta and do something there.

PM: Well, what about the next book, do you have something in your sights?

JK: Yeah, I have two different things that I'm working on, actually. But again, my agent doesn't want me to discuss them.

PM: Well, John, it's always fascinating to talk to you.

JK: When I interviewed Yusef Lateef, he would leave these incredible silences. And I was like--after a minute I would go, "Dr. Lateef?" And he would say, "Yes. I'm just formulating how this is going to look in print, because sometimes things look a little different in print than how you feel them when you're saying them, so I'm thinking about how this is going to look." I said, "Okay, fine." He formulated everything perfectly, it was amazing.

PM: Wow.

JK: And one of the things that he said was, "It's a small world. And I would hate to have said anything that could possibly hurt anybody-- we're all just trying to pay our rent."

We're all just trying to make our own expression of our music and the way that we see things. And I wouldn't want anything to be misconstrued."

So I really look at this and I try to be as fair in dealing with the garbage as I can, and dealing with what I think people should know versus what makes a good story, and what furthers Townes. Does this story further Townes' legend? Does this story further his music? Is there a point to this? This is the balance that you walk. This is the line that you walk as a writer. Writers have a big responsibility. This is what I always tell my students. Did I fulfill that responsibility? Did I abuse that responsibility? Is this going to help further Townes, get him a half an inch ahead of where he was? Well, I hope so. I think so. That's my dedication, that's my purpose. I take this stuff pretty seriously.

PM: And well you might. I do too.

JK: The other day I was on public radio in New York. And it goes to five states or something. And the guy hadn't done his homework. They had somebody interview me first, and I thought he was just going to give him all the information, and maybe he did. But somehow he didn't do his homework well enough. And at one point he said to me, "Well, why doesn't somebody like Townes have a best-of album, that you can just go out and get a greatest hits album of Townes Van Zandt?" And I said, "Well, he does. I wrote the liner notes to it." And he said, "Oh." And my point is that he didn't really know who Townes *was*. And certainly didn't know who I am.

PM: Right.

JK: He didn't know that I have eight albums out, and that I've toured and I've played with the Violent Femmes, or the Meat Puppets, or the Master Musicians of Jajouka and Allen Ginsberg. And that's fine, okay. He knew Townes a little bit. But the mindset is: "How come you don't have a greatest hits album, and you're not playing in a sports arena?" Is Frye the only boot company? Are Nike sneakers the only sneakers in the world? Do you have to smoke Marlboros? I guess my point here is that some of the best stuff is below the radar and that being serious about noticing as much of it as interests you matters, that it's important.

PM: It's great to talk to you, John.

JK: Thanks, Frank--I appreciate the opportunity. Puremusic is a Cadillac in the field, and it's growing. I'm glad to be in there.