

**A Conversation with Kathy Mattea**  
**by Frank Goodman (12/2005, Pueremusic.com)**

Perhaps like many of our readers, I thought I was pretty familiar with this artist. I'd heard all the radio hits through the 80s and 90s, and liked them a lot, thought she was a very consistent star, and one who picked great songs. Her time in the big Country machine seemed to be done, maybe she'd finished just in time. But the show I saw recently at the Belcourt Theater of Kathy Mattea and her incredible band redefined any of the half-baked ideas I'd held about who she was.

To put her evolution in some small perspective, it's helpful to know that her rise to stardom was slow, that she didn't break the Top Ten until the eighth single. (That would *never* happen in the Country market today. One would have been long gone after the third single.) She was voted Best Female Vocalist twice in the CMA's, and "Eighteen Wheels and a Dozen Roses" was the single of the year. She won two Grammys.

But by the turn of the millennium, Country was running scared and all of Music Row was in flux, like the rest of the industry. Before things got messy, Mattea opted to leave Mercury Records after 17 years, gracefully and amicably, and consider her next move.

After all, she'd not been a cookie cutter artist. Like Mary Chapin Carpenter, you could hear the folk background that in her case producer Allen Reynolds had skillfully shaped into something that would work in the Country scene. She was a modern day songcatcher, hung out with the writers (married one, Jon Vezner) and, above all else, her career has been about great songs. She did some writing, but always considered herself an interpreter with a more transparent style, the voice behind the song.

As our conversation details, her stage demeanor is very striking, and her band is mindblowing. Jim Brock on the drums and percussion plays like a medicine man. He did a solo with a hand drum that recalled the brilliance of Airtio Moreira, and that's like saying someone's sitar playing reminds you of Ravi Shankar. Although every single member of the ensemble is brilliant in their own right, musical director and guitarist Bill Cooley is also a true standout, and we look forward to hearing his new solo record, *A Turn In The Road*. Be sure to investigate Jim Brock's DVD, *The Art of Drumming*.

After her Mercury exit, Kathy Mattea found a happy home at Narada Records, well regarded as a World and instrumental music label. *Right Outta Nowhere* is her third and landmark release with them, and it's a must have for anyone who's been touched by this artist, because here she is truly shining. Here you get the beautiful person behind the voice behind the song. The chorus to the lovely title song (written by Steve Seskin and Christine Kane) says it all:

Right outta nowhere  
You open your heart  
And that changes everything  
You're going somewhere

And all you need to know  
Is that you're free to go

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**Puremusic:** So I've been listening a lot to *Right Out of Nowhere*, it's a great new record. And I've been considering the long and very graceful career you've had these twenty-some years.

**Kathy Mattea:** Thank you.

**PM:** It was kind of a gradual entry, didn't really chart heavily until the sixth or seventh or eighth single, then a long stardom peak, and a beautiful transition into being a less-country and non-country, very mature artist.

**KM:** Well, it's interesting, because it's not really something you can orchestrate. Somebody sent me a commencement speech that Steve Jobs did a few years ago. He talked about how you can only connect the dots going backwards.

**PM:** [laughs]

**KM:** And that's where you sort of see the results of small but significant choices you make along the way. And sometimes that's how you learn whether your values--whether your actions and your words match. If you say that you're all about a certain something, and look back and see that the choices that you've made don't reflect that, then there's something for you to look at.

**PM:** Right.

**KM:** So it's interesting, being able to put it in perspective.

**PM:** I saw the recent show at the Belcourt Theater, and was really knocked out by your performance--

**KM:** Thanks.

**PM:** --and your incredible band.

**KM:** Yeah. I have been blessed to work for so many years with great musicians. That's my joke with my manager: that I'm addicted to musicians.

[laughter]

**KM:** Really, the whole thing--it's just the jam that I can't get away from. It just pleases me so much. There's nothing more fun than sitting in a circle playing with people who are really into it.

**PM:** And you know as well as anybody how many great players there are in Nashville that still aren't necessarily inspired musicians--but the guys you work with, it's easy to tell how fired up they all still are about being musicians.

**KM:** Yeah. And the interesting thing is, when someone leaves the band, everybody kind of gathers together and hand-picks the replacement.

**PM:** Wow.

**KM:** And it's usually somebody that they want to play with, who has the same kind of values about music. There's nobody on the stage phoning it in. And everybody really is up for that musical conversation. I've come to understand my role. On some level, I provide the context for them to shine. I also know my role is the steward of the songs, and the center point, the artist that the stuff all revolves around. But I really try to honor that.

Whenever someone leaves, the next person that gets pulled in is somebody with similar values. And so it sort of keeps evolving--just when I've been thinking, "Oh, my God, how am I going to live without musician X," who moves on to something else. I've learned over the years that somebody new comes in who is not the same, but who is wonderful in different ways.

**PM:** Who is the newest member of the ensemble?

**KM:** Let's see, the newest member is Randy, the keyboard player--

**PM:** Randy Leago, yeah, a great player. [Saxophones, accordion, and various other things.]

**KM:** He's been with me for three years. Eamonn [O'Rourke] is about to leave.

**PM:** Where is Eamonn going?

**KM:** He's just got his finger in a million pies up in New York, and he's starting to do some composing for Irish dance troupes, like really complicated River Dance type stuff. He's really on to some stuff there. When you keep the caliber of musicians very high in the band, people are going to come and go. Some of them will be people who have to try various things, it's natural.

**PM:** He's hellishly good, that guy.

**KM:** He is unbelievable. He would play all day long. He'll play all afternoon, before the gig. If we have a day off on the road, he will go find a gig. He is insatiable.

**PM:** Now, has he been in this country a long, long time?

**KM:** Yeah, 12 years or so.

**PM:** Yeah. Is it Bill Cooley who's been with you the longest?

**KM:** Bill's almost 16 years with me--January it'll been 16 years.

**PM:** Wow. Is he the bandleader as well?

**KM:** Yeah. He's sort of the center point for the band. Everybody has an equal voice, but a lot of the arrangements come from Bill. Over the years, we've developed a kind of sixth sense about each other musically, and a way of communicating that's sort of effortless.

**PM:** I was struck, really, by the way you carry yourself. The way you do that and engage the crowd is really much different than any woman singer that I've ever seen that came out of the country genre.

**KM:** Oh, well, thank you--I guess. [laughs]

**PM:** Absolutely.

**KM:** I think it is one of the gifts of being over 40. If you can stay present, and not just go through the motions for a paycheck...if you can resist that temptation, or the temptation to feed the beast of the image, and stay centered in the music, then you get a chance to flesh yourself out a little more. And so my gift of having done that and having made that my goal over twenty-some years, is that I feel like I am somewhat more integrated as a person. I feel like I bring more of myself to the stage more honestly, and that the transition between who I am on and off stage is more seamless.

**PM:** Right. And you're already reflecting my next point, that part of what I mean in that last question is that you strike me as a very evolved person. Are there certain teachers or books or other things that have been instrumental in your personal life?

**KM:** Oh, lots of them. Lots of people, lots of books. And I think that if I were trying to respond to your statement and interpret it in any succinct way, I would say that I discovered at a certain point that I was going through this cycle. I would step into a place of being lined up with a sense of purpose and my inner compass, and everything was going in the same direction. Then I'd get lazy and get off the track. And then things would start to fall apart, and I'd back up and get it together again. And at a certain point I realized I was going back and forth and back and forth. And this particular time when I fell apart was so bad that I knew I had to figure out how to recommit to a certain point of

view. I had to make that the center in my life, or I just was going to keep going around and around.

So I really did stop and change what I saw I was about, and really try to put that principle into play as the center of everything--my friendships, my marriage, my career, my family, my way of being in the world. And that changed everything for me. I guess the biggest thing is that I committed to a spiritual center before I do anything else. And I put some daily things in my life into practice and I maintain that, to make sure that I don't drop the ball.

**PM:** Right. It's apparent to me, and others I'm sure, that you've adopted some kind of spiritual approach to your life. You can see it right on the stage, and easily imagine that the person on and off the stage is a much more seamless transition, if there's any transition at all.

**KM:** Well, I really appreciate that, because the thing for me that has emerged from that process is I don't have to be scared anymore.

For instance, I just came off this laryngitis, which I caught from my husband. He had a head cold or a virus, or whatever. And for me, when I caught it, I started to get the sniffles, and it settled in my throat. My head was clear, my chest was clear, and I had no voice. So I had to let it ride its course, and I went to the doctor. I did all the right things, and I took care of myself. But the sky doesn't open up and say, "It's all right, Kathy, your voice will be back by 8 o'clock Wednesday night."

You know, your speaking voice comes back, but your singing voice you use in a different way. So I had to try to make a judgment call and cancel some gigs. And the first gig back was in New York. And I walked into sound check, and I had a speaking voice, but there were parts of my singing voice where I could make the notes but there was no power behind them. So there were certain songs that just weren't going to live. And I started to freak out, and I thought, well, this is what you've got to work with, and you're here, the band is set up, you got the gig. This is a good example of what we're talking about. If I think it's about proving something, then I'm into my ego, and trying to live up to some image that I think people have in their head, or trying to blow their minds. Or if I have my head in the results, I can't work with what I have, because I'm trying to force something to happen. And with singing, any time you force it, you tighten up. If you tighten up, you're screwed, nothing will work.

So I had to just kind of go back to the hotel, take a shower, sit quiet, dig down deep, warm up, and allow myself to move into some kind of zone. And then I remembered that a lot of my favorite musical moments are not about perfection. And in fact, I think the more we start to worship perfection the more soul leaks out of art. So I considered, "Well, okay, what's my job here? My job is to be present in this moment with what is, and what comes." And so I decided to start my show with just the guitar. And I left the band offstage, and I walked onto the stage, and I told them what was going on. I said, "We're

going to find out together what I can or can't do tonight, but I'll give you 100 percent of what I have to give."

**PM:** Wow.

**KM:** And then we sang "18 Wheels"--and you could hear that my voice was not perfect. But I let them hear it. And then they didn't have to be nervous for me, and everyone could relax, and it was a wonderful evening.

**PM:** Yeah, I can certainly remember great shows when the performer was obviously not in their best voice, but it was a great show anyway.

**KM:** Well, that's the thing. We rob ourselves of so much by focusing on the wrong stuff. And the ability to get into the moment and deal with what is, that's the real opportunity.

**PM:** Right. Since we're on this kind of a subject, I want to ask you if you're planning to write a book about your life at some point, or are you already working on one?

**KM:** Well, no one has asked me that for many years. But I have been thinking about that. Part of my spiritual work is a thing that I do, that I picked up through *The Artist's Way*. [The artist doesn't say so in so many words, but is apparently referring to a technique of writing for a half hour without lifting your pen from the paper, just writing, without editing what's coming out.]

**PM:** Yeah, sure.

**KM:** And I still do this. I dropped it for a while, but have picked it up again. I was on the road this summer when I got a whole concept, and I got pretty high on that. I can't even say I've begun yet, but I'm trying on the idea that there is a book in my future. It'll take me years to get to the point where I know what it is. But I'm starting to see the process that gets me there. I'm starting to put myself in a position where I'm trying to learn what I know, and trying to articulate it. And that's been really fun.

**PM:** You are as song and songwriter-driven an artist as can be found. Are there any new discoveries in this realm that you care to mention?

**KM:** Well, there's Bob Halligan. That's been a few years ago. He approached me one time, at a gig of one of my backup singers. Have you ever heard of Ceili Rain?

**PM:** Oh, yeah, I do actually know of Ceili Rain. [[www.ceilirain.com](http://www.ceilirain.com)] Is Halligan a Nashville guy?

**KM:** He lived in Nashville for years. I called him up, I said, "This is Kathy Mattea. Who are you?" And he said, "Well, I've been a songwriter for years, and I've had artists deals. You probably wouldn't know my stuff. I've had success. Most of my stuff was like Judas Priest and Kiss--

**PM:** Oh, my.

**KM:** He was this heavy metal songwriter. And a radical Catholic Christian guy.

**PM:** [laughs]

**KM:** He loves rock 'n' roll, and he loves Celtic music. His wife asked him one day why didn't he put the two together? And that's how that band was born. He's a wonderful person.

I'm so in awe of those songwriter types, like Marcus Hummon, he's another one. He'll have twenty sets of ideas all laid out on a table in front of him, it just flows out of him like a spring. My husband is like that, but the songs tend to gestate inside of him, and they come out fully formed. But there are these people who get beautiful idea after beautiful idea, and they just can't get them all down. I'm fascinated by that life, because I really see myself as more of an interpretive artist. I can write, but my husband, if he does not write, feels ill.

And that's a songwriter, to me. When he was working in a machine shop, he would go home and write songs. He'd write songs all day while he was doing a job. That's a songwriter.

**PM:** You're married to a great songwriter, Jon Vezner. Tell us something about him.

**KM:** He is an artist. He's very conceptual, and has the right and left sides of his brain very integrated. He's really into computers and mechanical things, and recording gadgetry, all that stuff. He's pushed me into all kinds of thinking that's outside my usual box--he keeps me from getting really myopic.

**PM:** There are so many strong songs on this latest disc, *Right Out of Nowhere*. The two that that are really blowing my mind at the moment are "I Hope You're Happy Now" [written by Skip Ewing and Angela Kaset] and [Darrell Scott's] "Love's Not Through With Me Yet." Do you have favorites on this record, or do they just change over time?

**KM:** I think it's really hard to choose a favorite. Usually what happens to me is that I'll put out a record, and over time, a few songs sort of fade into the background, maybe one or two, and they're less prominent. And then the volume kind of stays up on the others--like a patchwork quilt, you know, they're good together.

**PM:** Yeah.

**KM:** "I Hope You're Happy Now" is, well...

**PM:** It's a monster song. [laughs]

**KM:** It's so amazing. And "Love's Not Through With Me Yet," I mean, Darrell came over to sing on that one. You've got to live through some stuff to write something like that. I'm in awe of so many people who do stuff that I can't do. I feel like I have this ticket into some club, because I was given and developed a voice. I can hang out with amazing people and do this precious thing. When Jim Brock plays the drums, I see God, you know? It's not fancy, he's not about flash. It's just deep.

**PM:** He's more like a shaman.

**KM:** He is very much like that, more like a mystic, and he's channeled all that into drumming. He has this wonderful DVD that he did called *The Nature of Drumming*.

**PM:** I've seen it. It's amazing.

**KM:** I really think that's what music and art is about. It's another way to connect to the divine. It's a real pure way of touching that deeper reality beneath our life.

**PM:** I love the three classics you've covered on this record, "Gimme Shelter," "Down On The Corner," and "Wade in the Water." Really cool.

**KM:** Thank you.

**PM:** How did they find their way into the recording?

**KM:** "Gimme Shelter" was the jumping off point for this record. We started messing with that one in the time period building up to the war in Iraq. We were really worried, like the rest of the world, and spent a lot of time on the bus talking about it. And you know, "Gimme Shelter" is just so relevant right now. It could have been written today. And I was agreeing, "Yeah, we should mess with that." And one day I came to sound check, and the guys had already arranged it. Bill Cooley met me at the stage door and he said, "Here are the lyrics to "Gimme Shelter."

**PM:** [laughs]

**KM:** "*Forty Licks* is on the bus in the CD player. I'll see you in 30 minutes."

**PM:** Unreal.

**KM:** And I just went out there and refreshed my memory. And when I walked in he had that arrangement. It sounded just like that in about 15 minutes. It brought the house down that night, because it articulated so much of what people were feeling.

And I couldn't have done the classic approach to "Gimme Shelter," but I have a certain sense of ownership because of the way we approached it. And we discovered that if we keep it acoustic, it becomes more about intensity than power or volume.

**PM:** Acoustic it's much more tribal.

**KM:** Yeah. And that was sort of a light bulb for all of us. That was when I started thinking I need to try to put that awareness in my recording life. Just turn the process around, and begin it organically with the band, and that was really what happened on this record. Then the other two classic songs were just part of that process.

**PM:** After so many years with Mercury records, it must have been difficult to find the right label, the right fit for your life and your career. How did it turn out to be Narada? What was the path to them?

**KM:** When I left Mercury, I didn't know what I was going to do. I asked out of my deal, because it just didn't feel right. I said, "You know, if I stay, we'll hate each other."

**PM:** It's a beautiful exit.

**KM:** Well, I could feel the part of me that just wanted to close my eyes and put my fingers in my ears and make another record and wait for it to flop. And I thought, "Why would you want to wait around? Why would you waste another hour putting it into this place where it doesn't fit?"

**PM:** Because people don't understand what it takes to make an album.

**KM:** Yeah, it takes a lot out of you. And so I knew I had to go. It was wonderful--I have so much love and respect for those people. It was wonderful to be able to walk away with good feelings.

So we started sniffing around. And there were these guys at Virgin Records Special Products in L.A., and they had had this idea--they'd had some success by thinking out of the box, and they'd been given the green light. They had this idea of taking somebody who had enough of a mainstream name, but enough sense of being an artist that they wanted to do something creative, and put them on their boutique label, Narada. They'd let them make the record they wanted, and use the big Virgin engine to distribute. They said, "You don't want to be on Virgin. You'd get lost in the shuffle. It'd be the 300-pound gorilla that would roll over and crush you. But this way you have access to it." It was sort of the best of both worlds. And I was thinking about an idea of a record that I wanted to make. And they loved my idea. So it was just a real good fit.

Six months later, the Mariah Carey deal blew up, and that entire division was shut down, all those people were gone. And I was left on Narada. Luckily the people there were just great, it's just a really cool place. You have to trust at some point that the universe has put you where you need to be. You have to work with what you've got. There's a lot less hype there, and they're really about nuts and bolts, a lot of their stuff is alternative marketing. And they've really embraced me. He just left this year, but until then, the place was run still by the guy who started it. He ultimately left this year to go teach meditation classes at the University of Wisconsin. [laughs]

**PM:** Who's that?

**KM:** Wesley Van Linda. He is an amazing guy.

**PM:** Does Narada do a good job marketing you to radio and TV?

**KM:** They have a pretty good system for that, but they've never done anything country. And we were moving away from country. But, still, there's a lot of our fan base that still listens to country. Actually, there's a new person who just came in with some creative ideas about reaching out to that base, and we are hitting the AC market well. [Adult Contemporary] They have a lot of stuff on the jazz charts. They're bright, and are after it.

**PM:** You look righteously good, if I may say so.

**KM:** [laughs] Bless your heart.

**PM:** [laughs] Any special physical regimen you're into?

**KM:** I run, and I lift weights a couple times a week. And I feel really good. I never really loved running, but I've learned to love it. I woke up one day and realized I'd been running regularly for twenty years.

**PM:** Really?

**KM:** Yeah. And I'm not much of a competitive person. Sometimes I run really slowly.

**PM:** How far do you like to run?

**KM:** About three to five miles.

**PM:** Have you read anything lately that turned you on?

**KM:** Oh, so much. Do you know Madeleine L'Engle? She's mostly known for writing children's books, but she wrote this book that Janis Ian turned me on to 15 years ago that I couldn't get into at the time. And it came back around in my life, suddenly three people mentioned it to me. So I went and bought it and read it. It's called *Walking on Water*, and the subtitle is *Reflections on Faith and Art*. I'll tell you, there are amazing passages. I was reading that book when I was making this record. Especially when I'm recording, I have to have a way to gather up my energy, and that book helped me. I can't even tell you how many times when I was reading it that what she described about the creative process and being an artist moved me to tears.

**PM:** Thanks for that. We'll check it out.

As a performer, or simply as a person, what countries or places would you like to visit that come to mind?

**KM:** Within the last several weeks, two or three people have been talking to me about South Africa. I don't know what that means, but a lot of times signposts come in from lots of different sources. I'd love to see Australia and New Zealand. I'd like to go back to Italy. But I'll tell you, I don't have the wanderlust that I used to have. I used to really need to do that, and I feel less compelled to do that now.

**PM:** That's interesting.

**KM:** Yeah. It's like I want to settle in one place, and have a point of view from that place.

**PM:** Lastly, I'll ask you: If there is one, what's the strategy now, where would you like to see your career and your life go?

**KM:** Well, part of this thing that spewed out of me onto paper this summer was a book idea. Another part has to do with speaking publicly. A few years ago, I got asked to do a couple of speaking engagements. And it continues to happen. I learn a lot from them every time I do it. At one point, I went and spoke to some students from Berklee College of Music. And through that process and going back and doing that every year, they asked me to do an artist-in-residence. I went up for a week recently and taught at Berklee, and it changed my life.

So I know that there's something coming up involved with speaking, I know that there's something involved with teaching. And I know that I don't want to stop doing music. And I think there's probably a book involved with that. But I don't know--the door just opened, and I don't know where the path leads yet. But I do know that I felt very empowered when I was teaching.

**PM:** That's very interesting, because the person that I saw on stage at your show recently is a person that could do something like what you're describing.

**KM:** Yeah, it's wild. This all came to me, and I thought, well, I need to bounce these ideas off a friend of mine at Berklee, and the phone rang, he had called me. And he had some ideas, bounced some stuff around with some of the people over at Berklee, and they had some ideas of what they thought I could do to help, things I could teach. And they said, "Do you have any ideas?" And I said, "Yeah." And out of my mouth came, "I'd like to do a clinic on this, and I'd like to do a master class. Here's what I'd like for it to look like, here's the theme of it." I was asking myself, "Where did that come from?" I have no idea.

And that was part of what happened when I got into a situation--I put myself out of my comfort zone and it felt like the right thing to do. I knew this was calling me. And when I

did, it was like discovering another hard drive in my head that has all this stuff on it I didn't know was there.

**PM:** [laughs]

**KM:** It's exciting. And it's all informed by performing, and that's my channel into the learning process. I get to go sit in a room with 30 people who are like I was when I was 20. What would you say to yourself at 20, from where you sit now, if you could. There's just something beautiful about that. Looking back these years later, I asked myself what things people had said to me that turned out to have had value. I've identified a couple of them that were just huge.

**PM:** Well, jeez, Kathy, it's very nice to speak with you this morning.

**KM:** Really nice to speak with you. I checked your webzine out. It's really cool!

**PM:** Thanks very much. Good luck with this new record, and the teaching to come.