

A Conversation with Neko Case
by Frank Goodman (2/2005, Puremusic.com)

Everybody needs a singer that makes their blood race, and their heart pound, and this is mine. The unbridled power and raw passion of Neko Case is the antidote to the poison the world is offering me one sip at a time.

I've been going back and forth this morning between studio and live cuts, and it's shockingly consistent. The studio cuts are so charged and the live cuts are so well sung and played, the biggest difference comes down to the sound of the room sometimes! (And the clapping, of course.) This new and glorious record, *The Tigers Have Spoken*, was cut live with the amazing Sadies (!) as the backup band. It's more upbeat than some of her records (I like the darker ones every bit as well) and it's already swelling the crowd that's coming to their feet. Sisters in arms Kelly Hogan and Carolyn Mark are slaying as the backup singers, unreal. I hope I don't have to fly all the way from China to catch this band, but I will see a couple of shows by hook or by crook. Jon Rauhouse is also kicking musical ass on pedal steel and banjo on this live record. (If you don't know by now how much we dig The Sadies, you might circle back to our interview with them a couple of months ago.)

Neko has worked with The Sadies a lot of her career, which now spans five records: *The Virginian* (1997), *Furnace Room Lullaby* (2000), *Canadian Amp* (2001), *Blacklisted* (2002), and *The Tigers Have Spoken* (2004). She also tours and records with a Juno-awarded pop band called The New Pornographers, and has recorded old time country with Carolyn Mark as The Corn Sisters. She's a sexpot and a wild child, but first she's an artist, art school trained (she did the cover for the new record), a songwriter and a musical interpreter with a high IQ and a deep integrity. She doesn't have to be concerned with putting herself across, because you can't take your eyes and ears off her. She's all about the song, and the players—she digs deep, and you can hear it on every tune.

Neko is often and rightly associated with the Canadian music scene, but is American. She lived a number of places in her youth, but Tacoma was the closest thing to home. She left there at 15, drifted to Vancouver, punk bands (she first sang and played drums in Maow, a trio) and art school, B.A. from Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in 1998. There's still plenty of edge in her traditional Country debut and fans of the punk side of Country need to have *The Virginian*. By the sophomore release, she had all the glossies behind her, like *Esquire*, *GQ* and *Time*, not to mention *The New York Times*, *Interview*, and *People*. And that's how her press has been ever since.

Progressively, the radio exposure has grown with each record. On the new CD, she went to #1 on the CMJ's Top 200, Core, and AAA charts. Now she's on Anti Records in L.A., one of the homes of the ultracool (Tom Waits, Joe Henry, Jolie Holland, Marianne Faithfull, etc.), with a big L.A. lawyer, she's definitely gone downtown. But if anyone is unspoilable, if any woman singer is uncompromisable, it may well be Neko. Anti's slogan is "real artists creating great recordings on their own terms." *The Tigers Have Spoken* certainly fits the bill, it's one of the best live records we've ever heard. (God Bless The Sadies—and Kelly Hogan, Carolyn Mark and Jon Rauhouse, too.) And it bodes well likewise for the next studio record, due most likely in the fall of 2005.

This record's originals and covers, including an outstanding Buffy Sainte-Marie song, "Soulful Shade of Blue," rendered with true verve here. (We'd love to talk with her, if anybody out there runs into her...) We consider Neko Case to be as soulful, musical, and otherwise crucial a singer as can be found today. New Yorkers, don't miss those two dates at The Bowery Ballroom on February 13 and 14. We may see you there, with a little luck.

We caught the artist for a conversation en route to a gig in Ohio, traveling with the girls, mid-afternoon to them and 5 a.m. Shanghai time on a Sunday morning.

Neko Case: Hold on one moment. I have a call on the other line, and I'm going to tell her I'm going to call her back.

Puremusic: Okay, thanks.

NC: Hold on one second. Hello.

PM: Hi.

NC: How are you doing?

PM: I'm fine. I'm up early.

NC: Oh? Where are you?

PM: I'm in Shanghai.

NC: What are you doing in Shanghai?

PM: Well, I do music and music business in Nashville, but a small band of us came here trying to do some TV.

NC: Oh, wow.

PM: Yeah, yeah. It's a real adventure. And learning Chinese is fun, and just being in a completely alien environment is just a good exercise for the brain.

NC: Yeah, it is. I love that.

PM: Yeah. Where are you?

NC: We are currently driving through Merrill, Indiana, going to Cleveland, Ohio.

PM: A gig tonight?

NC: Yes. We're passing Chipchivanna right now.

PM: [laughs] So who's the live outfit at the moment?

NC: The Sadies.

PM: Ah, The Sadies...

NC: Yes, and myself.

PM: Yeah, we're super big on The Sadies and talked to both of the brothers and had them on the cover. We love that band.

NC: I know, I do too.

PM: So you're all in your van, or a couple of vehicles? How are you—

NC: No. Well, the ladies, today, are driving in my van, and The Sadies left earlier because we had a bunch of mail-out stuff to do, so we left a little bit later. But we'll be hot on their tail.

PM: Oh, wow. Oh, you mean, the whole *Tigers* band and the backing vocal section are all touring?

NC: Yep. Kelly Hogan is along as well. Carolyn (Mark) couldn't make it because she's ridiculously busy right now. We have the lovely Kathleen Jud, also, with us today. [tour manager, if we got that right]

PM: I see. I've got to come to the States on Monday night to help write a business plan. But if I finish that, I hope to fly out and catch a date.

NC: Well, we're playing in Toronto tomorrow night, and then we start our next tour on February 11th. We go from Montreal all the way down to Atlanta and Louisville.

PM: Will Nashville be—

NC: Are you going to be around?

PM: In February, I might be.

NC: I don't think we're playing Nashville.

PM: No?

NC: Well, no, because nobody wants to see us. People always say, "Come to Nashville, it's going to be awesome." And then we go and then people just couldn't care less. So we were like, "Nah, we're not going anymore."

PM: Nashville can be so messed up that way.

NC: I know. I love going there to hang out, but playing a show there has been hard on us.

PM: I saw you once there. I had to cover a couple of shows that night. But you were playing the Slow Bar. And I came in and caught the very last song.

NC: Oh, that was the show that made us go, “You know what? We’re never doing this again!”

[laughter]

NC: I like the Slow Bar, I like the people that run it, but Nashville has all these built-in crowds of people who just—they come to the show and they yell over the top of it. They don’t really care what’s going on.

PM: It’s just too jaded. There’s too much music every night.

NC: I don’t even think they’re jaded, I think that they’re totally unaware.

PM: Yeah, yeah. I thought it was really great. I mean, some of us at the webzine really think you may be the best woman singer working today.

NC: Ohh...thanks.

PM: Yeah. We’re real Nekophytes.

NC: Ah, thank you. No one’s ever said it quite like that before.

[laughter]

PM: What was the other word that came mind—oh, yeah, Nekophiliacs.

NC: [laughs] How dirty! How very dirty to say.

[laughter]

PM: It’s only right... You know, I love the way you sing because I’m moved by how much you put into a song. I always feel like you’re actually *giving* the listener something, as if saying, “Well, here I am. Here it is.”

NC: Ah, thank you. I try. If you were inside of my body you would be going, “I got to hit that note, oh, my God, they’re going to know I’m a fraud! Lift that note! Lift that note—ahhh!”

PM: I think the new CD is one of the best live discs I’ve ever heard.

NC: Thank you.

PM: It’s a beautiful spirit, not only—

NC: Is it my birthday today?

[laughter]

PM: Every day.

Not only are The Sadies in amazing form, but having Carolyn Mark and Kelly Hogan on the sessions is really amazing.

NC: I know. I know. John Rauhouse [steel, banjo, etc.] did a really great job, too.

PM: He's awful good.

NC: Yes he is. And his artery was ninety percent blocked!

PM: Oh!?

NC: You should hear him now.

PM: Oh, so he got it—whatever you call it—fixed?

NC: He got an angioplasty. And now he says, "I haven't felt this good since I was nine!" It's kind of hereditary in his family. They have some heart issues. But man, he's doing great.

PM: Oh, that's great. Who's he working with mostly? He's not out with you right now, is he?

NC: No. He's at home right now. But we've been working on a studio record as well. We've been doing a lot of that.

PM: There's a new album due out from you in the spring, right?

NC: Probably more like fall. We don't have enough lead time for spring right now. And the New Pornographers are recording at the same time, too, so it all takes a little longer.

PM: You've got a Pornographers record coming out near the same time?

NC: It'll probably be out in the fall, also.

PM: You're a hardworking woman.

NC: I know.

PM: Is there any stripped-down solo record on the agenda at all?

NC: Stripped down meaning like another *Canadian Amp*? Cut in that style? [*Canadian Amp* is a Bloodshot Records release from 2001 of mostly covers that Neko cut in her kitchen—very starkly Neko, very good.]

PM: Yeah, more like an *Amp*.

NC: Well, I think on the next record there will be some more stripped-down things, but it's not going to be stripped all the way down, it'll be like...in between the triangle of *Amp*, *Blacklisted* and *Tigers*, really.

PM: Right, right. Oh, that makes sense.

NC: I hope so. [laughs] We don't know until it's finished.

PM: What about the Corn Sisters? [a great old time country act with Carolyn Mark]

NC: Well, the Corn Sisters, we kind of kidnapped Kelly Hogan into our band, and when we go out and play shows, nobody ever uses the word the Corn Sisters, they'd just print our names, so we kind of gave up on it. [laughs]

PM: Right.

NC: But it's better now because we have three ladies instead of two. And we kind of forced John Rauhouse to be in the band too. We tie them up, we throw them in the van to bring them on the road.

PM: Yeah, it's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it.

NC: That's right.

PM: Would you talk to us a little about The Sadies and your relationship with them?

NC: My relationship with The Sadies?

PM: Yeah, and just working with them. Because I think it's a beautiful thing that *Tigers* will bring that incredible band to a greater, wider audience. And so while we're on the line, maybe talk a little about The Sadies.

NC: Well, I really hope it does expose more people to them, because they're pretty much the greatest live band ever. They're so talented. And I've known this for a long time. We feel very cozy together and easy-going, and we have a lot of things in common. I don't know, we just click. It's nice. I love them. I love them to death. I feel like I'm related to them. It's strange, because I also find them incredibly attractive, too.

PM: Well, yeah, they're all cool-looking guys.

NC: I can't look at them on stage.

PM: [laughs]

NC: Poor Kelly, last night, I thought she was going to pass out.

PM: Yeah.

NC: I was trying to get her attention, she's all, "Dallas is talking to me..."

[laughter]

NC: "Excuse me, Dallas is talking to me right now."

[laughter]

PM: When he talks, I was surprised that it wasn't really super, super low, the way his singing voice can be.

NC: But his speaking voice is still pretty low.

PM: Oh, I was supposed to call his girlfriend and get a print of that color shot of The Sadies record. That was a really, really amazing photo on *Favourite Colours*, right?

NC: Do you need it for something connected to the press, or is it for you personally?

PM: No, I just want to buy a print from her, just to frame it.

NC: Aw! Man, that would make her so happy, too. She's a really good photographer.

PM: Are you playing a lot of guitar on stage these days, Neko?

NC: Yeah, I play guitar on pretty much everything. I don't really know that it would be noticeable if I did or didn't. [laughs] Maybe if you took it away, you'd notice it.

PM: Yeah, right. Mostly electric, or mostly acoustic?

NC: Mostly electric right now. But they definitely don't need me to hold anything up, guitar-wise.

PM: Shouldn't we talk some about Kelly Hogan or Carolyn Mark, while we're discussing your friends?

NC: Sure, we can talk about them right in front of them, they love it. What would you like to know about them? [laughs] Oh, Kathleen wants everybody to know that Kelly said "Single," right off the bat. I guess we're all single right now, I forgot.

PM: Thank you, that's very important, actually.

NC: I do have a dog I'm very devoted to.

PM: What about Kelly Hogan, does she have new recordings our readers should know about? What's she doing solo?

NC: You want to talk to her? Hang on, I'm gonna pass you over to Kelly Hogan, single.

Kelly Hogan: Hi there, Hogan here.

PM: Hi Kelly. What are you up to solo that we could share with our readers?

KH: Thanks. I'm doing a jazz-oriented band these days, called The Wooden Leg. We play every Thursday night at The Hideout, in Chicago. Their website is hideoutchicago.com, and you can check it out there. We play makeout music—we turn the lights down, and try to help people get it on, that sort of thing.

PM: Yo.

KH: We call it jazz with a limp. We have a great Hammond [organ] guy, guitar, bass, and drums. We turn the lights down, there are no pimples or wrinkles in the back room on Thursday night. Helping people get it on, that's my crusade.

PM: Unbelievable.

KH: We just recorded a live record. I don't know if it will come out on Bloodshot, I'd like to put it out myself. I'll be mixing that in February, should be available in the spring. You could find out at my website or the hideout website.

PM: You're a monster.

KH: I'm a mess, really. But you know what? I just turned 40, and I don't care.

PM: A major talent, and hella fine. Kelly, thanks for talking with us.

KH: You're welcome. Here's Neko again.

PM: Hi, Neko, so let's talk about *The Tigers Have Spoken*.

NC: Sure.

PM: I hadn't heard a Buffy Sainte-Marie song in a long time.

NC: I know what you mean.

PM: Wow, that was an out standing cover of "Soulful Shade of Blue."

NC: We did a credible version of her, I think. I love her.

PM: Have you talked to her— is she around, first of all?

NC: Yeah. She apparently is still incredibly foxy as well, I'm told.

PM: Oh, yeah, she always was.

NC: She still performs, yes. I think she lives in Canada. Actually, no, I don't know where she lives. But I know Carolyn Mark actually introduced her at the Edmonton Folk

Festival a couple years ago. And she was like, “Wow! She was incredible! She was still smokin’ hot.”

PM: Wow. And so you haven’t spoken to her since you cut that, you don’t know her or anything like that.

NC: No, I don’t know her. I wish I did. [Find out some of what Ms. Sainte-Marie has been up to recently at www.creative-native.com]

PM: She’s got to catch wind of the fact that some hot singer just cut “Soulful Shade of Blue,” and that a lot of people are listening to it again.

NC: Well, that would be cool, if somebody told her. But you never know.

[A discussion broke out about gas and a bathroom break, and they started pulling over and up to some tanks.]

NC: Diesel, diesel, diesel—straight ahead.

PM: Wow. Do you know the Jim Lauderdale song “Diesel Diesel Diesel”?

NC: No.

PM: Great song, I thought you were quoting him. Have you done any acting?

NC: Oh, God, no. Everybody wants to do that.

PM: That’s true. Everybody wants to do that.

NC: Hold on one second. I have to work this freezing diesel pump.

PM: Oh. It’s pretty cold in Shanghai. What do you got out there? Thirties?

NC: Oh, it’s so frickin cold I can’t even tell you. I don’t even know. Last night I think it was like five below zero or something, just unbearably cold. God, I can’t get this cap off. There we go. Damn.

PM: Wow, I’ve never interviewed someone who was trying to get a cap off the gas tank.

NC: No, it’s off this horrible diesel additive.

PM: Oh, the additive, yeah.

NC: Okay, you put it in. I’m going inside, it’s freezing out here.

PM: Many of us are keen to have a DVD of the live show. Is that going to happen?

NC: We have a lot of footage, but I didn’t have time to go through any of it, so it’ll probably come out later, on something else.

PM: Oh, but there's footage, great.

NC: There is footage. I don't know exactly when or how it will come out. We're probably going to make an EPK [electronic press kit] or something for the next record. Some of that could end up on there.

PM: I know you're a really "green" person, and you're somewhat political, is that accurate?

NC: Well, I care about what's going on, if that's what you mean.

PM: Just in a normal way, say?

NC: Well, maybe a little more than a normal way. I'm pretty sad about who got elected, but I was inspired by all the people that got involved.

PM: Are you reading anything that's turned you on lately?

NC: I just started reading this book by this guy named Mitch Cullin whose title slips my mind at the moment. He wrote a really great book called *Tideland*, which was just made into a movie. [The first reunion of Terry Gilliam and Jeff Bridges since *The Fisher King*.] He's a really great writer, I think he's from Tucson. [Neko is probably referring to Cullin's latest book, *A Simple Twist of the Mind*.]

PM: Your love of real country music is evident always in your music. Are you much for blues or jazz or—

NC: Yeah, I like those things a lot. I think I pretty much like everything. There's no type of music I don't like.

PM: I don't like opera much. At all, really.

NC: I love opera.

PM: Any songwriters that have moved you lately?

NC: Joanna Newsom.

PM: She's really great. Yeah, she's on my list. You like her.

NC: I love her. She's really, really great.

PM: We're getting on to her. Well, Neko, it's been great to talk to you, like I said. You don't know, but I've been chasing down this interview for a long time.

[laughter]

NC: We've had a tough recording and/or touring schedule for some time, I apologize.

PM: I understand, you're a busy person. If you think of it, please tell Dallas and Travis that I said hey.

NC: My pleasure.

PM: Yes. It's beautiful to talk to you. And I'm going to see if I can fly out in February sometime and catch a show and introduce myself.

NC: Please do. That'll be great.

PM: And we hope *Tigers* goes super well—I know it will.

NC: Thanks, Frank. I really appreciate the call.

PM: Thanks, Neko, see you soon.

