

**A Conversation with Sarah Borges**  
by Frank Goodman (10/2005, Puremusic.com)

It was the Americana Conference weekend, mid-September, 2005. There were a lot of shows I wanted to see at night, always two booked at the same time across town from one another. I'd heard a lot about Sarah Borges, but hadn't heard the CD yet, so I didn't know if she was any good. (Some people, after all, just have very talented or hard-working, expensive publicists.)

It was still early, and I was comfortable at home. But I thought Jimmy Ryan might be playing in her band, I wanted to say hi to him and see him play. She might be good, anyhow. So I got dressed and grabbed my camcorder, and went down to The Basement, a great little joint resuscitated by Grimey and Jeff, where the cool and cutting edge acts are likeliest to appear in Music City.

Grabbed the table front and off center, that way you're not shooting through or around anybody. I'd met the artist outside the club, she was very down home, great chick. She was making a set list. "Looks like a no makeup night" she was saying, running kind of close to show time. I suggested a little lipstick wouldn't do any harm. She was young and fair, long and lean, and her dress was white with blue flowers. She looked like a lot of fun—seemed pretty relaxed, all right.

Bass player was a little guy like myself with a Mustang, I like those and any short scale bass. He was very animated, so we got into it a little as the players took their places and tuned up. The house lights came down, and a hush slowly came over the crowd. I'm glad I had the camera running at the top because they put the room right on its ass in a heartbeat.

Everybody on stage had attitude, and personality. I was having a good time, great songs played passionately at the right volume. I was lucky to be in front of Mike Castellana, on steel and guitar, and he was kickin ass big time. Sarah was really sexy and very smart, excellent front person, very credible. Star quality. Somebody you could really get behind.

The band had obviously done a lot of shows together, and held the crowd closely. Near the end, Sarah asked the audience if they wanted to hear a sad song or stay up tempo, and unfortunately the party rules. But you can hear all the songs on their fabulous debut, *Silver City*, on Blue Corn. Later that night, the band and I ran into each other at The Mercy Lounge, up front for the Robbie Fulks show, which was unbelievable as well. We talked a little bit, and the more I heard, the better I liked her.

We're very big on this act—she is *the* new Americana artist to watch this year.

**Sarah Borges:** This last trip was probably the best time I've had in Nashville thus far. I hadn't spent an extended period of time there, and so we were there for about four days, so I kind of got a chance to explore a little bit.

**Puremusic:** Well, I would say that to an enviable and a laudable extent, you took the town by storm during that short visit.

**SB:** [laughs] Well, I certainly hope so. It's had some nice repercussions for us, and they were made even nicer by the fact that we'd been in a van driving so much of the time. So really, anything that shows that your efforts are coming to fruition is such a plus because it keeps you going.

**PM:** Yeah, because that's a very difficult way to live. I've been there.

**SB:** Yes. I'm glad that you know, then, without me having to sort of go into the details.

**PM:** Yeah, the very sorted details—especially of being the only chick in a band.

**SB:** It's true.

**PM:** The chick and the boss.

**SB:** Yes, that's another very true thing. And also I'm a fair amount younger than everybody else.

**PM:** Right. Yeah, you're a ripe 27, right?

**SB:** That's right.

**PM:** Jeez, that is young. Well, you really, really gave it to them right between the eyes at the Basement that night.

**SB:** [laughs] When we went to the show, I didn't really have a lot of expectations, because I have never done the AMAs before. I've been, but it's different when you play. And we had done that Sin City thing the night before, and I think we did an okay job of getting people to come to the show, but I didn't know how okay of a job we had done until I got there. There were a good number of people there. And a lot of them, I knew who they were and what their function was in the music world, and like that. And we knew the challenge going up there a little bit. We had a ball.

**PM:** That's the thing about a great little room like The Basement: if somebody decent is on the soundboard, if the band is really tight, and if they get the decibel level and the excitement right, you really can get, and you really did get, that memorable pressure cooker effect.

**SB:** Yeah. We have a place—it's funny, we were talking about it when we started to play—in Boston called the Lizard Lounge, actually in Cambridge.

**PM:** I've heard so much about it, but I've not yet had the pleasure.

**SB:** I like clubs that you go to and you're just transported. When you're there, it could be day, it could be night, you have no idea. You have no idea what time of year it is. You're just there watching a band. The Lizard Lounge is a basement venue, again, and it has a lot of like red curtains. We had our record release show there, and it was the same kind of feeling, just a dense packing of bodies, and it just has a good vibe.

**PM:** I mean, could you tell what I could in the audience on tune one? I said to the person next to me, *damn, this chick is going to tear the roof right off the place.*

**SB:** [laughs] Well, it took us a long time to find the stuff that we do that consistently works for us. You sort of have to get a show going. And hopefully, no matter what the venue or no matter what the circumstance, it's going to work out okay for you. So it sort of took us a while to get there. But the first part of the set is sort of front loaded for that effect. Like, "Here we go, let's bust it out of the gate." And then we sort of have a lull so that everyone can regroup, and then we have a little surge there at the end, too.

**SB:** Right, yeah, let's start with the battering ram, and then we'll climb over the walls.

**SB:** Yeah. And then lastly, we'll just blow them up.

**PM:** [laughs]

**SB:** So when I got to the middle lull, I had a moment of doubt there, I'll be honest with you. I had a moment of like, "Oh, we've lost them." But that's a delicate thing to take the audience through. And if it's a Saturday night crowd, sometimes they want to dance and have a good time all night. They don't have the patience for a sad song, or a little bit of introspection. It's rare that you find an audience that is with you every single song, but those people really were.

**PM:** And there was one point—I don't know if it was the middle lull, as you call it, or at the end where you were giving the audience the option of having another up-tempo song, or something sad, and I was clamoring for something sad, and people said, "No, no! Something fast."

**PM:** Yeah, I mean, that sort of is a good indicator where I was at. I couldn't tell what they wanted. So I decided just to ask rather than trying to guess. I'm home, now, I'm back in Boston. We played the last show of our tour on Sunday night in Chicago. And we played at the Old Towne School of Folk Music, which is beautiful venue. It's about a 450 person theater. We played with Dave Alvin, and Robbie Fulks hosted it, and it was part of his Secret Country Series.

**PM:** Right. I'm such a Fulks man. You and I were standing next to each other at his show just the other night.

**SB:** Yeah. I mentioned you to him, actually. We went out drinking afterwards. He's a great guy. And Dave Alvin, I'm in awe of him.

**PM:** Oh, yeah.

**SB:** I didn't know that there was going to be an interview portion at the beginning of the show. They sat us all on a couch, and we have a little chat, and it's in front of the entire audience, and it's taped for broadcast, so that was pretty funny.

**PM:** Really? Oh, that's the Secret Country setup, huh, the live interview in front of the audience. [laughs]

**SB:** Yeah. And it's everyone together, so it was me and Dave Alvin, fielding questions. And Dave Alvin is so cool. He always wears that red bandana, and he's always got the cigarette between his fingers. He wears the big boots. But where I'm going with it is it was another one of those nights where I felt like we did a good job of keeping the audience involved. And they were nice enough to ask us to play one more at the end of the night. And we chose a very somber, very sad song. And it went off aces. We really did a good job. So that's the flip side, sometimes it works out the other way.

**PM:** Right. It's nice—you can pull that off better in a theater than in certain kinds of clubs, for sure.

**SB:** You can, absolutely.

**PM:** So to people like myself who aren't from Boston, you seem to have just exploded onto the scene, a lovely entrance, to be sure. But what's the real story?

**SB:** Boston is a hard town for making a go of music. It's kind of saturated when it comes to good musicians. And the roots music part of the Boston scene, it's not huge, but it's very warm. So I've been doing this here for probably about three years or so, and it's only since we made this record that we've really gotten any notice at all. We've always had good fans who come up for the shows and packed our record release party, which was a coup for us. And we just were nominated for the Boston Music Awards, which is kind of a ceremonious thing that they have here. We're going to play on the award show, that's next. But it really just took so long. The first year we went to South By Southwest, the reception that we got there was better than the reception we were getting at home.

**PM:** Ah, yeah, I'm not surprised. Sometimes the prophet is not recognized in his or her hometown.

**PM:** There are so many musicians in Boston, and because it's a college town, the kind of music that the audiences want to hear isn't really what we do. And there are just so many options for people to go see.

**PM:** Right. I'm not really that cued into the college crowd and mentality, but that's easy to imagine. I don't know what they're after, exactly.

**SB:** They're after a lot of indie rock. And another thing that was big here for a long time is bands like Interpol, which is not a band that I'm wildly familiar with, but I do know their style of music, and certainly bands that I'm sure are very entertaining, but I just don't know how to do that stuff, nor would I want to.

**PM:** Well, wasn't there a period before you started playing Americana, at least that is what one reads about you, that you were into some of the indie rock scene, as a performer.

**SB:** Sure. Well, when I moved to Boston for college, which was in the '90s—

**PM:** Where did you go out there?

**SB:** Emerson College. So I moved here in '95.

**PM:** From?

**SB:** From Taunton, about four miles away. And at the time I moved there, which was in 1995, indie rock was the thing. And a lot of the major labels had umbrella divisions where all the indie labels were housed. They were signing bands out of Boston like crazy, bands like Throwing Muses, or Buffalo Tom. It just made it seem so much more accessible to me. These were people that you'd go to see in the clubs—

**PM:** You'd see them in the clubs and then they'd get record contracts.

**SB:** Yeah, and then you'd see them on *120 Minutes*, which was on MTV then, that was when MTV still actually played music and played videos. But I would stay up late every Sunday night when I was a kid and watch all these bands that I could go see like that weekend in the club down the street, or whatever.

**PM:** That is pretty unusual.

**SB:** It was an amazing feel, especially for someone who was an aspiring musician and didn't have a heck of a lot of background. I didn't ever go to school for music or have really a lot of formal training. And I guess in the kind of punk rock aesthetic it made it just seem like there was a path there, and I could take it, and it wasn't exclusive at all.

**PM:** Right, and it was working.

**SB:** Yeah. So like probably everyone does, you find people who are sort of of the same mind and you start a band. I had this band that was this rock band called Kipper Tim, which was a revolving cast of thousands. [laughs] I had so many people in that band. And I did it for about six years.

**PM:** I'm a little friendly with Dinty Child, who plays accordion on your record.

**SB:** Yes! I met Dinty because my boyfriend, Jake Brennan—

**PM:** Ah, I figured he might be your boyfriend. What a nice guy he is. [Jake plays rhythm acoustic in Sarah's band, and has his own record out, *Jake Brennan and the Confidence Men.*]

**SB:** The way I met Dinty is—I mean, he's certainly a personality here in Boston. But Jake was doing some demolition work for him. Dinty runs a lot of demolition work here in Boston, like breaking down walls and—

**PM:** Really? Demolition work! It's crazy what musicians do.

**SB:** But he's an ace musician. Today, I've just come back from my straight job, and I've got to tell you, I'm shell shocked. I just don't know what to do. People are asking me questions that are not about a band. I work at a college by day, when I can.

**PM:** Which one?

**SB:** Berklee College of Music.

**PM:** What do you do for them?

**SB:** I work in the admissions office. And I love my job, but it's so different from what I do, it's a hard transition. On a physiological basis, I'm getting up early, and I'm working—I have a tough schedule, on one hand, and on the other hand it's just a completely different hang. [laughs]

**PM:** Even though it's theoretically a bunch of musicians there, it's a job in admissions. One's not hanging out with the sax players.

**SB:** Right. And a lot of the people here, they're kids, they're students, and they haven't gotten to the part in their music life where they get in a van and drive around, and they may never.

**PM:** They're copying Larry Carlton's "Kid Charlemagne" solo, note for note.

**SB:** Which in and of itself is a beautiful thing. Berklee has morphed a lot over the last twenty years and they pride themselves on being into contemporary music and fusion, which they really are, but now they have a heavy metal ensemble and a Bob Marley ensemble, and a Bob Dylan one, and now they're trying to have bluegrass. Actually, this guy, Matt Glazer, who's—

**PM:** He's amazing.

**SB:** Yeah. So you know him. He's the head of string department here. And once a year he gives a talk about the history of American music, and he has all these great video clips and audio clips. It's fantastic stuff. So there are definitely perks.

**PM:** Yeah, absolutely. At the recent Basement show I had one of those all-too-rare experiences where in a thirty or forty minute set you actually get to liking all the different people in the band. That was very unusual.

**SB:** [laughs] We all have interesting personalities.

**PM:** Not only that, but they actually emerge. I'm not used to seeing that—

[laughter]

**PM:** —on a regular basis. Usually the front person has the personality, and the rest of the people just kind of do their part.

**SB:** We have this running joke where it's sort of like we're this band full of front men. But Binky, our bass player, is a laugh riot.

**PM:** He's unbelievable.

**SB:** He went and sat in the crowd, which he's wont to do, quite often. And he freaks me out sometimes. He jumps off things. Or sometimes we can't find him. At that theater show I talked to you about a minute ago, we all get up on the stage, there's all those people, God damn it, we can't find him anywhere. He was locked out of the building cause he was out smoking grass before we played. So now it becomes this huge joke. He's been in bands forever and ever. He was in a band in the '80s called Likkety Split. But he writes his own songs and he's got his own stuff he does. And Jake has his own thing. And Mike has been a guitar guy forever, and he's a road hog.

**PM:** Well, he's a real guitar hero [Mike Castellana], you can tell he's done it up and down.

**SB:** He went on tour with Eddie Kirkland for a long time.

**PM:** The Jazz giant?

**SB:** Yeah. He's sort of a jazz/blues guy, but he can do a lot of things well.

**PM:** I dug Binky, I relate to a short cat with a Mustang Bass.

**SB:** He's a riot. And that's really his true personality. We stay in hotels sometimes. He only sleeps in the van, because it's like his traveling living room.

**PM:** He'll only sleep in the van, not in the hotel room. [laughs]

**SB:** He likes to stay up late and smoke some cigarettes, talk on the phone, watch DVDs on his DVD player.

**PM:** That's rock 'n' roll. He'll only sleep in the van.

**SB:** Yeah, we go to bed too early for him. We're the old farts. It's funny. I first met him, we were at a party, and I don't know anyone, and it was late, late. He was wearing a brown velvet

smoking jacket, drinking whiskey, and he invited me to join him. He said like, “Hey, doll, I haven’t met you yet, but I bet I’ll know you better after this whiskey.” Like he’s just a love.

[laughter]

**PM:** Unbelievable. So tell me about Mike Castellana.

**SB:** He’s our newest guy. We’ve only had him about a year. We found him through the pedal steel player who’s on our record some of the time, Steve Malone. Mike is on the record, too, but he sort of came in at the tail end of making it. Mike was Steve’s pedal steel teacher. And Steve moved to California, and we needed a pedal steel player. Boston isn’t exactly rife with pedal steel players.

**PM:** That’s believable.

**SB:** So he was the next logical guy. And he has the added benefit of being a guitarist, too.

**PM:** That’s an understatement. [laughs] And even though he’s seated, he puts out an immense amount of juice and personality for a guy that’s obviously just the guitar/steel slave.

**SB:** Yes. It wasn’t a conscious effort to sort of establish that element of shtick, but it just happened—we call him Papa Yawna, he’s sort of our Zen guy in the corner.

**PM:** Yeah. Is he from the Boston area, or did he move there?

**SB:** He is from Long Island. And he went to Berklee.

**PM:** Well, when I first arrived at the club, I ran into Jake, because I was hoping that Jimmy Ryan was in the band. [See our reviews of Jimmy Ryan. Alternately, you can use our “search” link to track names, nouns (like banjo) or other notions.]

**SB:** Jimmy is our good friend. He plays with everybody, and he’s on the record. But he has just come back recently from touring with Laura Cantrell. He was out with her for a while.

**PM:** It’s a good gig.

**SB:** Yeah, I think it was good for him, because music is his livelihood.

**PM:** Are you guys selling records?

**SB:** Yeah, we’re not selling as many as I’d like, yet. Part of it is that nobody knows who we are. The way people find out is they come and see us, or they happen to see us because they’re watching someone else. So we sell a lot of records at shows. But the SoundScan system, it’s difficult.



**PM:** Oh, yeah, SoundScan doesn't know anything about what's sold off the stage. Those numbers never get entered. [It's keyed to cash register sales at retail outlets.]

**SB:** They do, but it's this whole series of hoops you have to jump through. They give you this form, you have to fill it out, have the authorized person from the club fill it out, put in all their address and telephone information.

**PM:** Interesting.

**SB:** Then you have to get your label to sign it, put in the UPC code of your record, put in like the label ID number, and then you have to fax all before—

**PM:** Nobody gets all that together.

**SB:** Yeah, all before a prescribed time.

**PM:** Oh, yeah, right, that happens a lot on a rock 'n' roll tour.

**SB:** Exactly. The whole thing gives me an ulcer, literally, it's just such a pain. And it makes me so mad, because with all those records we sold, we probably would double our Sound Scan numbers if they only knew.

**PM:** Right. Yeah, no doubt about it. And is there any road manager on the tour, or are you guys just road managing yourself?

**SB:** Well, it's kind of just me doing it.

**PM:** That really sounds like the road manager's job, but there isn't one. [laughs]

**SB:** It is. And if we had the money, God, would we need it. I sound like a little whiner here, but it's a lot to know where you're going and manage the money and deal with all the crap.

**PM:** Well, it doesn't sound like whining to me.

**SB:** Especially when you're a girl, and there's three men or four men.

**PM:** And none of them want to help.

So do you find time between your rock 'n' roll life and your job at Berklee to read? Are you reading anything lately that turned you on?

**SB:** I've sort of been reading only short things because I only have a little short time period. I did just read that Richard Russo book, *Empire Falls*. And we had watched it on the last tour, that HBO miniseries.

**PM:** What did you think of that?

**SB:** The series I liked, mainly because it was very entertaining, and somewhat wholesome. I'm like really into wholesome entertainment.

**PM:** You are?

**SB:** I hate like Quentin Tarantino and all that stuff.

**PM:** Really?

**SB:** It makes me feel icky. [laughs]

**PM:** You're surprising me. I wouldn't have guessed you were so G-rated.

**SB:** I'm so puppies and kitties.

**PM:** Well, I'll try not to hold that against you.

**SB:** Still, every once in a while, I find something that I can hang with. We did have a day on tour when we sat in the hotel all day and drank beer and watched only Rolling Stones movies. We watched *Cocksucker's Blues* and *Gimmie Shelter* back to back.

**PM:** Well, there you go.

**SB:** So every once in a while I fall off the puppy and kitty wagon.

**PM:** How about that new Stones' record?

**SB:** It's really good.

**PM:** It's great!

**SB:** That *Rough Justice* is something else.

**PM:** Yeah. So you read—although you read *Empire Falls*—mostly short things because that's all the time you have.

**SB:** Yeah. I'm really addicted to *Vanity Fair* magazine. I feel like it sort of puts me into the Hampton set for like five minutes at a time, and I'm brilliant.

[laughter]

**PM:** And what's on the turntable, so to speak?

**SB:** Well, it's sort of actually the van table, would be more apt. I love the new John Doe record.

I liked X because they were weird, and his record is—I don't even know what the hell you'd call it. There are a lot of good duets on it. It's called *Forever Hasn't Happened Yet*.

**PM:** Oh, that's a great title.

**SB:** Yeah. So I really liked that a lot. Do you know Phil Lee? He's a Nashville guy.

**PM:** He's a buddy of mine.

**SB:** Is he?

**PM:** Oh, yeah, definitely.

**SB:** We love his record, the *Mighty King of Love*. What's the line? "You should have known me then, before my life went down the tubes, I woke up every morning with my head between two boobs." [laughter] You're kidding me! Awesome!

**PM:** Yeah, he's an amazing dude.

**SB:** I was just picking Robbie Fulks' brain about him. I guess he played with Bill Kirchen a while ago on the same show that we just did.

**PM:** Wow, Bill is an old friend of mine from Marin County. I haven't seen him in many years. We're way overdue on covering him.

**SB:** He was there, I guess. And I hope I'm getting the pairing right. I know that even if they didn't do it together, they both have done that XM show recently. But Robbie just sort of had some cool little details to share. And then we met this sound guy in Raleigh, North Carolina. That's how we got the record. We had heard all these mystical stories about Phil Lee. And we mentioned him to this sound guy, and he said, "Yeah, man, I've seen him. He's played this club. His pants are so tight we have to help him up on stage. We have to use a hand dolly." And then he gave us a copy of *Mighty King of Love*, which we proceeded to listen to for the rest of the country.

**PM:** I can't wait to tell Phil.

**SB:** Well, here's the next part. When we got home, Mike Castellana went and got his new record. And one night we came home drunk from a show, where we had been talking about Phil Lee incessantly. And Mike got on the computer and drunken dialed, but in e-mail format, it's like, "I love you, I love your songs," all this crap.

[laughter]

**SB:** And Phil Lee emailed him back the next day. And they started this little correspondence. And Phil Lee even like sent him his phone number.

**PM:** He's an incredibly funny guy, off the disc, too. And his wife is very straight-laced looking, incredibly cute, and I think is a financial manager or high level accountant. They're an excellent pair.

Tell me, are you what might be called a spiritual person?

**SB:** I am, I would say so. I don't necessarily subscribe to a lot of organized religion, but I think I have my own personal spiritual space that I occupy, definitely.

**PM:** Yeah. Are you oriented toward any path in particular?

**SB:** Not really. I was raised a Unitarian, so I think I was raised in sort of one of the most accepting religions—you know, come one, come all, was the church philosophy. I didn't go to church as a youngster, but my mom certainly taught me that the Bible is a piece of literature, and should be treated as such.

**PM:** That's an enlightened idea, in my opinion.

**SB:** Yeah. She believes that very spiritual things happen, and in little miracles, and in little sweet things that happen in your life that are like little guiding lights.

**PM:** I think some of those are taking place in your life.

**SB:** I hope so, definitely. I mean, I feel like sometimes you work really hard, and it sort of seems like it could be for not, like that you see that maybe coming at the end of the pike, and then something happens that you makes you feel gratified. And I guess if you were truly spiritual, the work in and of itself would be enough. So I'm not quite that enlightened yet.

**PM:** Well, you're so presentable looking and—

**SB:** Gee, thanks.

[laughter]

**PM:**—and the band is so explosive—no, really, you're terrifically cute, and the band is so good that really, obviously what needs to happen is that you need to go on TV. So has that happened yet, or is that about to happen?

**SB:** We're trying. We got a Hollywood Reporter piece, that was a plus for us, and sort of it turned up excerpted in a lot of national papers. It was in the Boston Herald and Chicago Tribune, among others. So if we could just get a few more of those... I feel like that would be the next morph for the whole thing.

**PM:** Thanks for your time today. I think you're just really fantastic.

**SB:** Well, I certainly hope to see you sooner rather than later. We're going to try to come back to Nashville in the next couple of months. So when we do, please be advised I will be calling you up.

**PM:** Hope so, see you then.

