

A Conversation with Chris Smither
by Frank Goodman (9/2006. Puremusic.com)

Most of the black bluesmen who were "discovered" in the 1940s and '50s have passed on. There are exceptions, from the poverty stricken to the highly successful. The mostly white figures of the folk boom of the '60s who followed them are now hitting or living their sixties. Just the way that many of us took special notice of the work of these black bluesmen in their later years, there are many figures of the '60s folk movement to whom we should be paying particular attention, since one day in the foreseeable future their special voices will not be heard.

Chris Smither is unquestionably one of the most distinguished statesman of the blues and of folk music. Unlike contemporaries such as Jackson Browne or Bonnie Raitt, he did not go the big band pop music route. He is a quintessential solo act, just fingerstyle guitar and a board under his rocking foot, sometimes a harmonica, and a road-honed baritone to deliver his lifetime of songs.

As a songwriter, he came to national recognition when Bonnie Raitt cut "Love You Like A Man" which has since been cut by other great female singers, the recent notable being Diana Krall, who certainly doesn't need to look far for great songs to cover. Chris cut two well-received CDs in 1970 and '72, and then lived the blues in a bottle story for about a decade, climbed back out and has since made ten records, and we think his best work is still ahead of him. But *Leave The Light On* is his finest to date, and his second with producer David "Goody" Goodrich, a longtime multi-instrumentalist/producer to Peter Mulvey and a growing list of artists.

Although Chris Smither seems progressively vital in recent records, he is one of the best of a vanishing breed, a picture of a time. If you don't yet own one of his CDs, this is a good place to hop this freight. One of the greatest American folk blues artists, ever.

Puremusic: It's really a pleasure to speak with you. I first started seeing you play at the Main Point.

Chris Smither: Oh, really. That was way back.

PM: Yeah, and the Philly folk festivals, I mean, like in the '70s.

CS: Yeah, jeez.

PM: My vision of you back then was always with a motorcycle jacket. And I have some reason to believe you were riding a BMW back then.

CS: Oh, there used to be a promo shot of me with a BMW, but my bike wasn't a BMW.

[laughter]

PM: Is that why I think that? It was some kind of a promo?

CS: Yeah, yeah.

PM: Oh, that's amazing. You look very well on your album cover. It's really encouraging to see that. How are you, and how is your health, and all that?

CS: Oh, I'm fine. I'm in good shape.

PM: You seem really vital.

CS: I don't know, everybody tells me--I just adopted a kid. [laughs] We went to China and adopted a little girl. And everybody kept telling me, "Well, that'll keep you young if it doesn't put you in the grave first."

[laughter]

PM: Where did you go? To Shanghai, Beijing, or out in the country?

CS: No, we were out in the country. Well, Nanchang is the capitol of Jiangxi (Jyang-shee) Province, and that's where we were. And then we went down to Guangzhou (Guang-jo) to do the American consulate processing, and then came home.

PM: That's amazing. Was it a very long process from start to finish?

CS: About sixteen months.

PM: Wow.

CS: It's longer now. They've stretched it out for people who are waiting now. But we've been back with her for a year now.

PM: What's her name?

CS: Robin. But I'm doing really well. I've been lucky. [laughs]

PM: It's fantastic. Although you had your lost years, as many of us have had ours--

CS: Uh-huh.

PM: --it seems like you got sober a long time ago.

CS: It's almost twenty-one years now.

PM: Wow.

CS: Yeah. It does seem hard to believe.

PM: But it really works.

CS: [laughs] It's just like they say, you just go one day at a time, and all of a sudden you look up and you realize it's been an awfully long time.

PM: So this new record, *Leave the Light On* is really brilliant work.

CS: Thanks, man. I'm glad you enjoy it.

PM: Well, it's just super. And it's great to hear "Father's Day"--that had to be a very hard song to write.

CS: You said it. That was actually the hardest song I ever wrote.

PM: Yeah, that's really a power packed song. I thought the end, of course, was particularly good.

CS: Thanks. The difficult thing was just to try to stay somewhat objective. It's the kind of thing where it would be so easy to pull punches. Both on yourself and on the old man.

PM: Right.

CS: But I was really pleased with the way it came out. I thought it showed just enough selfishness on the son's part--

[laughter]

CS: --to ring true.

PM: So many of us look for the approval of our dads, and it's not really until very late in the game that it occurs to most of us that they want ours as well.

CS: I know. [laughs] Well, I'm over sixty now, and it only just occurred to me that they might like to hear a word of absolution.

PM: Yeah. I'm not happy to say that I never really got my father's approval, and when he looked for mine, I wouldn't give it to him, either.

CS: Yeah, right.

PM: And it's disappointing, but I just wasn't there yet.

CS: It's tough. And in a way, that song was not so much really about me and my father as it is just about sons and fathers.

PM: Everybody's, right.

CS: Yeah, because the fact is that my father now, he's going to be ninety this year, and he doesn't show any signs of quitting, either.

[laughter]

PM: Really?

CS: Yeah. I mean, he's amazing. It wouldn't surprise me if he lived to be 100, it wouldn't surprise me in the least.

PM: Where is he from? What stock do you come from?

CS: English.

PM: And is he second generation American, or--

CS: Oh, heaven's no.

[laughter]

CS: I mean, we've been here a long, long time. I think the first Smithers came over about 1640.

PM: Holy jeez!

CS: So it's like daughters of the Mayflower, things like that. It's really been a long time, about 300 years, something like that, the families.

PM: Damn!

CS: And on my mother's side, they've been here a long time. And they're also English. Their name was Weaver.

PM: Oh, so you're English all the way back?

CS: Just about, yeah. There's a little bit of Swiss in there, Swiss/German.

PM: Well, I didn't notice until right before our interview that the key line of "Father's Day" appeared also on the inside binding of the album jacket.

CS: Yeah, right.

PM: That adds a beautiful touch.

CS: Yeah. Not my idea, but I sure did get a good designer for this one. I love the way the package came out. I think it's a very handsome package.

PM: It's very good. I mean, just the whole coloration, the ambience of the package is really superb.

CS: Yeah. A good photographer and a good designer, and you put them together. [Meghan Dewar is the designer and Liz Linder took the photographs.] I gave that record to a friend of mine and he looked at it and he said, "God, this picture makes you look like you know something."

[laughter]

PM: That's a good photographer.

CS: That's what I say.

PM: Yeah, I'm going to show this around to my older singer/songwriter friends--and I mean forty and over--

CS: Yeah.

PM: --who are like doing all these photographs from their prom, and blurry photographs. I'll say, "Look at this guy! This guy is sixty-one! Come on! Just get a good photographer, will ya?"

[laughter]

CS: You just got to find somebody who really knows how to shoot 'em.

PM: That's right.

What kind of a home and a family did you grow up in, and what were you like as a youth?

CS: Oh, I was a faculty brat. My father was a college professor. And I grew up in a house full of books.

PM: Wow. Where was he a faculty member?

CS: Tulane University.

PM: Oh, wow.

CS: I grew up in New Orleans.

PM: That's something. Yeah, they're going through a lot of changes, Tulane, wow.

CS: No kidding. But I think it will probably be the making of them.

PM: Yeah. So were you one of several kids?

CS: No, I have one twin sister, and that's it.

PM: And what did she get into? Did she raise a family and all?

CS: Yeah, she did. Yeah, she's got a couple kids. In fact, she's got grandchildren now.

PM: And you're a survivor, and so many musician friends have died from natural and self-imposed causes.

CS: Yeah.

PM: What musician friends that have moved on do you find you miss, or miss the most?

CS: Oh, actually the only one--I lost a lot of friends, but not too many musicians. Peter Bellamy was an English singer, and he killed himself, probably, gosh, it has to be twelve years ago by now, fourteen, maybe, something like that. And I still miss him. He was a good guy. But it makes me mad. People who kill themselves really make you mad.

PM: Yeah, 'cause you never get to understand.

CS: Yeah. Well, it's like... I don't know. I don't know. I haven't lost that many musicians, yet. I mean, obviously, you don't live to be sixty-one without people dying, but most of my musician friends have done pretty well.

PM: That's good to hear.

One of my small regrets in life is that I never got to see Mississippi John Hurt play.

CS: Yeah. I saw him play two or three times--three times, I guess.

PM: Did you get to befriend him? Was he a buddy of yours?

CS: No.

PM: You've just seen him play.

CS: He died in '67. And I saw him play in New York in 1964. I was on my way to Paris for a year, because I was student. I was taking a boat at the time.

PM: Wow.

CS: Yeah. It was way back.

PM: That was another time.

CS: It was. But I went to New York early on purpose to see if I could get to see some of the people whose records I was listening to. And when I got to New York, who should be playing at the Gaslight but Mississippi John Hurt.

PM: Oh, my lord.

CS: And I went down to see him.

PM: You remember that show well?

CS: Oh, I do, I really do.

PM: Yeah. And he played solo, right?

CS: Well, actually, no. There was a guy playing harmonica with him, which really irritated me.

PM: I'll bet it did.

CS: Because I wanted to hear the guitar playing. So I asked some guy who was sitting next to me, "Who is the harmonica player?" And the guy said, "Oh, isn't he fabulous?" And I said, "Well, I'd rather hear him solo. But who is it?" And the guy says, "Oh, his name is John Sebastian."

[laughter]

CS: And I remember being enormously impatient because it seemed to me that the opening act was interminable, and I wanted to get to John Hurt. And it was some guy in a madras shirt named Tom Paxton. I'd never heard of him.

[laughter]

PM: Oh, shit, that's funny.

CS: It was a riot.

PM: Oh, my God. Yeah, I think the first song I ever played out in my life was a Tom Paxton song.

CS: Really?

PM: Yeah, it's amazing. I played at a high school talent show. It was "Job Of Work." That's the first tune I ever performed in my life.

CS: Hey, yeah.

PM: This morning I got the latest album from your producer, David Goodrich, in the mail.

CS: Yeah, what was it called?

PM: *Dust of Many Horses.*

CS: Yeah, I've heard that.

PM: We're acquainted with his genius from the work of Peter Mulvey.

CS: Yeah.

PM: But I'd like hear about it and about him from you, if you'd be so kind, about Goody.

CS: Oh, the smartest thing I ever did was get him to produce me. I was casting around for somebody new, and I'd been working with Stephen Bruton. I had a really good time working with Stephen, but I just thought it was time to do something with somebody else. And I had some people in mind. And Peter Mulvey had said, "You should work with Goody. Goody would do a good job with you."

PM: Yeah.

CS: And I thought, well, I'll think about it. And then out of the clear blue sky--well, maybe not such a clear blue sky--Goody called me up. And he made a pitch for himself.

PM: Are you kidding me?

CS: No, I'm not.

PM: He made a pitch for himself. Well isn't that something.

CS: Yeah, he did. He said, "I know you're thinking about so-and-so and so-and-so, and these other people, but I just wanted to call you and make sure that you understood that in my mind, I could do you. I could produce you the way you're supposed to sound."

[laughter]

CS: And I said, "Well, thanks for calling. I'll keep it in mind. I'll put some thought into it." And he said, "Please do, because I really would enjoy doing it." And so then I went back and I listened to this--I had like a minidisk of some stuff that we'd been doing just sitting around the living room. He was over one day. And I listened to it, and I realized that he was right. He really understood what I was doing. He was just playing along on some slide, and this, that, and the other. And then I went back and I listened to one of Peter's records. And I realized that the guy operates out of a very broad palate. He's got a lot of ideas.

PM: Right. He's a very wide-open character.

CS: Yeah. So I said, "Let's do it." And so we did *Train Home*. And I was just more pleased with that than I'd been with any record I'd ever done.

PM: Wow.

CS: So I couldn't wait to do another one. And of course by the time we wound up doing this one, *Leave the Light On*, he had a lot more production under his belt.

PM: Right.

CS: He's been working really hard.

PM: And his playing sounds better every time I hear him.

CS: Oh, yeah. I mean, he's grown my leaps and bounds. He's about forty-one now.

PM: Is that all? Hmm. Yeah, he's hot. I'm looking forward to hearing his *Dust of Many Horses*. One of my favorite musicians--I live in Nashville--is all over this great record of yours, Tim O'Brien.

CS: Oh, Tim, yeah. It's funny, because David asked me, "You got anybody you want to use on this record?" And I said, "Well, we could ask Tim O'Brien," because I'd done a couple of short tours with him. We've gotten to be pretty good friends.

PM: Great guy. [see our interview with Tim from a couple years back]

CS: He is a great guy. And Goody looked at me and said, "Do you think he'd do it?" And I said, "Sure, he'd do it if he's got the time."

[laughter]

CS: And he said, "My job is over."

[laughter]

PM: That is the right producer. Oh, that's something. And I love how Tim never gets on a record just in one way. If he's playing, he's singing.

CS: Yeah. I mean, he's fabulous. He came up, he flew up. I picked him up at the airport. We went to the studio. I mean, we were staying at the studio, too. It was kind of a place out in the country that's got an apartment. And we basically got the whole job done in about six hours.

PM: What?

CS: Yeah.

PM: That is making short work of it.

CS: Yeah. It was amazing.

PM: That's something else.

It's been a trademark of yours for such a long time to mic your feet live, and in the studio, too, I see.

CS: Yeah.

PM: Did you at one time, or do you currently, use one of those boards, or do you just stick mics on the floor? Or how do you do it?

CS: I have a board. I use just a piece of high-density particle board. And I just put a mic down by it.

PM: So it's nothing that plugs in or anything?

CS: No, no.

PM: It's just a board.

CS: [laughs] I've had a lot of people try to sell me things. "Hey, this is the board--this board sounds fabulous." And I try to minimize the whole thing. I use particle board because it's dense and it doesn't have any tonal qualities of its own. I don't want any tone. [laughs]

PM: "I got a foot for that."

CS: Yeah, really. It's funny. It's not something that I really think about. Tapping my feet, the whole thing is just unavoidable. It's one of those things I just have to deal with.

PM: Right.

CS: And so sometimes it's a little alarming when people really want to know about it.

[laughter]

PM: "What, you got a foot fetish?"

[laughter]

CS: Really. Here I am trying to deal with this affliction, and all you want to do--

PM: "Oh, you want to talk about it."

CS: Yeah, really.

[laughter]

PM: So I'll get off of that, then. But one more question--and I mean it seriously--do some shoes or boots work better for that, or are you just--

CS: Yeah. I'm very particular about which shoes I use. And they get harder and harder to find, because I like light shoes, very light Italian shoes with thin soles, and thin leather soles, because I like a hard rubber heel and a thin leather sole, because it gives you a lot of differentiation between the way the heel and the sole sound, because I rock my foot back and forth.

PM: I see. You get two sounds.

CS: Yeah. And so I've gotten to the point where the shoes that I use for playing and recording, I don't wear on the street.

PM: Right. You don't want to wear them out.

CS: No. The pair that I've got now have been resoled like three times.

PM: Wow.

CS: And I think this time, if I can avoid walking on the street them, they'll last a lot longer.

PM: [laughs] Well, I'm glad I asked that. It's pretty damn interesting, actually.

That's an unbelievable Peter Case song you picked for this record, "Cold Trail Blues."

CS: Oh, it's beautiful, man. Peter is--he should be famous. He should be a lot more famous than he is.

PM: I couldn't agree more. I interviewed him a long time ago. And yeah, I just think he's one of the greats.

CS: Yeah. And a good guy, and he's funny, too. I love hanging out with him. It's great.

PM: So how do you know that song and--

CS: It's just always been a favorite of mine, we're good friends. *Flying Saucer Blues*, I believe, was the album that that one came out on. And to me, it was a standout song. It's not one that he plays a lot, but one that I always liked.

PM: Yeah. It's so naked and so self-effacing, and just so true, or something--

CS: Yeah.

PM: --awful, awful good. That was an interesting idea of your friend Steve Tilston to play "Visions of Johanna" as a waltz.

CS: Yeah. That just came about--he kept telling me about it. And he said, "You got to try it. You got to try it." [laughs] I remember we were riding in the car, and we were singing it. And he says, "This will work in three." And I said, "What are you talking about it?" And he says, "Well, listen, all the key lines like really work." "Jewels and binoculars hang from the head of the mule"...

PM: Yeah, right.

CS: So it was really interesting. And then I mentioned it to Goody, and he got really excited about it. He said, "Oh, we gotta do that, man. We gotta do that."

[laughter]

PM: Is he a friend? Is Dylan is friend of yours?

CS: No, I've never met the man.

PM: Isn't that something?

CS: Yeah.

PM: How can that be? I mean, so many gigs, and so many of the same joints, the same years.

CS: I don't know. It just never happened. I've barely laid eyes on him. I think I've only seen him once or twice.

PM: That's really amazing. I would never have thought that... Your version of "Johanna," it's kind of a quick waltz.

CS: It's actually 6/8 more.

PM: It's more 6/8-y, right.

CS: Yeah.

PM: Have you ever had occasion to see anyone move to it, anybody dance to it, yet?

CS: No, huh-uh.

PM: Because that'll be something to see, the day somebody hits the floor when you play it.

CS: Somebody starts waltzing to it, yeah, that'd be cool.

PM: There was a thank-you in the album credits to everybody that sang at your sixtieth. That had to be a hell of a gathering.

CS: You know what? They got together--I didn't have anything do with it. They just invited me to Club Passim here in Cambridge. And there must have been a dozen singers from around here. They did a whole evening of nothing but my songs.

PM: Wow!

CS: And I was thrilled. It was amazing. I mean, the place was sold out, it was packed. Everybody knew what was going to happen. I didn't sing at all. I just sat in the audience. And it was amazing, because most of them were a lot younger than I am. And they all had their arrangements of my songs, and they didn't announce what they were before they played, so you didn't have a clue--and for the most part, since it was their own arrangements, you didn't even recognize the song until they started to sing it.

PM: [laughs] Isn't that something...

CS: And it was great. I mean, it was really great. It was like seeing your kids come home after a long time, and you barely recognize them, until they start talking, and then you go, "Oh, it's you! Jesus, you look great. I like your friends, too."

[laughter]

PM: Oh, that's unbelievable. So after sixty, I mean, I'd say you climb into national treasure stratum.

CS: Yeah, I ought to, right. Maybe I can get a grant from the government.

PM: [laughs] Wrong country.

CS: Yeah, that's right.

PM: You're one of a very finite number in that musical category. Do you feel, as I certainly do after listening to this last record, that your finest musical years are still ahead of you?

CS: I don't know. But I feel like I'm at the top of my game.

PM: Yeah.

CS: I mean, it may go downhill from here, who knows? But it hasn't started yet.

PM: Yeah. I certainly think that there's a lot of great records left in Chris Smither, and maybe his finest records ever.

CS: I certainly hope you're right. I don't feel like quitting yet, let's put it that way.

PM: Yeah, well, that'd be bad news for everybody. You're a very reflective and thoughtful guy. Would you also call yourself a spiritual person?

CS: To a degree, as much as you can be a spiritual person and not believe in God.

[laughter]

PM: Well, that is an interesting dichotomy.

CS: Yeah.

PM: But yeah, I don't think they're mutually exclusive.

CS: No, they aren't. Let's put it this way, I'm a non-theistic spiritual person. Whatever's out there, It may not even be intelligent, it's just bigger.

PM: Right, just bigger, right. Well, jeez, it's fabulous to talk to you today, Chris. You're just as warm and friendly a subject as one could hope for. And I think this record is a fantastic work, and it's wonderful to be able to share it with our readers.

CS: Well, thank you very much, Frank. It's been a pleasure.