

A Conversation with John Cowan
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic 5/2002)

John Cowan is one of the most versatile and recognizable tenor voices in popular music. On top of being gifted with a fabulous set of pipes, it's an instrument that he's worked tirelessly since he was a teenager, in every possible kind of musical setting. Rock & roll bands, soul bands, country records and TV, metal bands, forget about it. But he is most well known for his sixteen years with the maverick outfit that changed bluegrass and acoustic music more singlehandedly than anyone else, The Newgrass Revival.

The longest running lineup of the band was Sam Bush on mandolin and fiddle, John Cowan on bass, Bela Fleck on banjo, and Pat Flynn on guitar. But in several configurations and on several labels, they released over a dozen records. They charted with a couple of songs, but survived through relentless touring. This was before there was any Americana radio at all, or any significant public radio airplay for non-commercial music.

For those unfamiliar with Newgrass, their approach to bluegrass included doing all types of material—rock, jazz, blues—and jamming in ways that were more familiar in jazz or psychedelic rock bands. They also never looked the conventional bluegrass part, they were definitely renegade hippie virtuosos running around the country's venues and festivals in a bread truck. They were literally trailblazers. A whole generation of musicians cites Newgrass Revival over and over again as a major influence on their music and their life.

As John goes into in our interview, he invested many years after the demise of Newgrass in '91 into several projects, none of which really panned out in the career blueprint ultimately. Three or four years ago he started again in this vein he'd mined so long; he put together a band of great players, and made an eponymous solo debut for Sugar Hill Records, with his very talented friend Wendy Waldman co-producing. That record hit some very high points, as he continued to redefine his multifarious self. I hear a whole new pocket and comfortability in his music and his band in this new record, *Always Take Me Back*, and I'm happy to see it catching on at radio and retail.

John's recent profile has been elevated by his association and cross-pollination with popular jam bands like Leftover Salmon and The String Cheese Incident. When Drew Emmitt of Leftover Salmon decided to make solo record, he used the John Cowan Band to back him up. (More on that in our interview with Drew Emmitt in this issue.) The John Cowan Band is playing festivals everywhere the sun is shining this summer.

Puremusic: You always *sound* good, John, but now it sounds like you're *doing* good. There's a lot more depth to this record, to my ears.

John Cowan: Yeah, it's more personal. I really just started writing songs in my thirties. I'd always been an interpreter, and found great songs by songwriters I admired. I still do that, because there are so many damn good songwriters out there. It's just a process, Frank, as my life and my recovery have developed. To be honest, I was so inspired by Darrell Scott's *Family Tree* album...

PM: Isn't that amazing?

JC: ...that I thought, it isn't so much that I want to do that, but there's stuff on my plate, emotionally speaking, that I wanted to address. I wanted to write songs about it, and that's what happened.

PM: Wow. Does Darrell know that?

JC: I don't know. He's a good friend, and he played on the record. I've gushed to him and about him for the last ten years, and continue to do so. He's America's best kept secret. [see our recent interview with Darrell Scott in the archives]

So *Always Take Me Back* was somewhat inspired by that. We all have a different story when it comes to our nuclear family. It's so important to who we are as humans, so it's worth exploring. I hope to keep writing in that vein, stuff that's a little more personal. Although I always like writing with Fred Koller, he's such a wordsmith. We cowrote "Monroe's Mule" on this record. He's so good. He's a storyteller, I'm not.

PM: You are with him.

JC: I am with him, yeah. But his nature as a writer, he's a narrative guy. That's what he does.

PM: Didn't he open a bookstore?

JC: Yeah, I think he did, actually.

PM: Not only that, I think that Gwil Owen [another great songwriter in this town who cowrote the Grammy nominated tune *from The Horse Whisperer* with Alison Moorer called "A Softer Place to Fall," among many others] did a similar thing, but I think his business is mail order books. It's an epidemic or something.

JC: I know Fred has enough books in his house to open a bookstore, that's for sure. And I think he's read them all. It's unbelievable. [John's dog is going crazy, he's trying to calm her down, lets her in.]

PM: What is your nuclear family setup? I know you lost a brother recently.

JC: I'm the youngest of four. My sister and I are a year apart, we kind of grew up together. My brother that died recently was eight years older, and our other brother is 11 years older than I am. So we didn't exactly see them, it was more my sister Sue and I. My parents had us really late, my dad was 40 when I was born, and my mom 38. We were accidents, actually.

PM: And, because you were accidents, what was your perception of the attitude toward the late arrivals, past or in retrospect?

JC: Well, it's always tough deciding how much you want to reveal about that personal an aspect of one's history, you know. It was a pretty rough and tumble, crazy thing. My dad was a practicing alcoholic. It was a pretty typical, lower middle class alcoholic family. Pretty crazy.

PM: Was that in Kentucky, or...?

JC: Actually, we moved around. We started out in Cleveland, went to Pittsburgh, and to Louisville, KY when I was twelve.

PM: Having grown up in a pretty crazy family myself, I can certainly relate. That certainly sounds like a rich vein to tap. And you're still tight with your sister, Sue, is that right?

JC: Yeah, we're very close. She lives in Evansville, IN. That's where we moved, one last time, in my senior year in high school. I went to one year of high school there and one year of college. Then I went back to Kentucky and started playing in bands. A year later, I was in Newgrass, by the time I was 21.

PM: And that lasted, what, 15 years?

JC: Sixteen years.

PM: Now, it's safe to say that Newgrass was the group that changed bluegrass forever, even acoustic music at large. That's not too far fetched, is it?

JC: Well, we were one of them. I think one of the reasons that we made such a dent was that we hung in there for so long. There were people before us: The Dillard's, they made two brilliant records that are hard to find now, *Wheatstraw Suite* and *Copperfields*. They had drums, unheard of then in that kind of music. Herb Petersen, Doug and Rodney Dillard, and Mitch Jayne. [And Dean Webb on mandolin, depending on the year.] There were some other people, you know. There was a thing that was happening at the time, the early 70s, The Flying Burritos Brothers and Poco.

PM: And Muleskinner, too.

JC: Right, that was about '73. [A great outfit that included Peter Rowan, Richard Greene, Ben Keith, David Grisman, and Clarence White of the Byrds.] Not to mention that *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* came out in '73.

PM: Ah, right. Some of that stuff is older than I recall.

JC: But we just did what we did, stuck to it, and never changed. We took those four instruments, electric bass, guitar, banjo, and mandolin—well, Sam played fiddle, too. You know, the first record they made, before I joined the band, had a Jerry Lee Lewis song, a Leon Russell song, and also had Bill Monroe songs. So, right from the start, they were about reviving newgrass music, which had already been begun by The Dillards, The Charles River Valley Boys, and Jim and Jesse and The Osborne Brothers at different times did some wild stuff, even Flatt and Scruggs did a rock record at one point.

So, the name said a lot, though people never really looked at what the name was about. Sam had grown up playing traditional music, but had also been bitten by the psychedelia bug as a kid. He grew up playing mandolin and fiddle, but his guitar playing was all about Jorma Kaukonen. He loved The Airplane, and he loved Cream. So, here was this kid that was an incredible traditional player, that was soaking up all this psychedelic rock. He just decided he was gonna fuse this stuff together.

PM: When Jorma was in town recently, he's an old buddy of mine, we did an interview around that record he was doing with Sam and Bela and some of those guys. It was cool to see that come around full circle. As amazing as Newgrass was, and the trail they helped blaze, that's a really scary group of fellas you're working with now.

JC: Yeah, they're really talented guys.

PM: I mean, that Jeff Autry is a hellish flatpicker, right off the top.

JC: No doubt about it. And what's really cool about those guys is that they're right at the perfect age, most of them are in their mid-thirties. When they were growing up, learning how to play music in bands, they were studying Newgrass Revival, David Grisman, and Tony Rice. So they know my catalog. Newgrass was a big chunk of the foundation of their musical appetites.

PM: And the same is true for Drew Emmitt of Leftover Salmon [also interviewed this issue], he used your band to back him up on his first solo effort, *Freedom Ride*. He cut his teeth on Newgrass as well.

JC: Absolutely. There's a whole new wave of kids out there that grew up on Newgrass.

PM: That must be an awesome feeling, right?

JC: It is, it's nice. The only thing that's a little frustrating about it is that the audience doesn't necessarily make that correlation, it's the young players that do.

PM: Really?

JC: No, the audience just takes the bands at face value, they don't know the story, the history. They don't know what a Newgrass Revival is. Maybe some of them do, but they're the exception, not the rule. But it's okay.

PM: The ones in their thirties, not their twenties, are more likely to know the connection.

JC: Right, the high school and college kids are not likely to know. They'd like it if they heard it, but they don't make the correlation.

PM: And that's what makes it a good idea to keep cross-pollinating with the generation of bands like Leftover Salmon, and so forth.

JC: Exactly.

PM: How about a word on some of your guys. [Banjo player] Scott Vestal is an amazing character.

JC: He grew up listening to Bela Fleck the way a serious horn player would have worshipped Charlie Parker. But he definitely has his own voice. He's a very soulful player. Scott grew up in Oklahoma and Texas, and he's kind of a redneck. I don't mean he's a racist or anything. Bela grew up in NYC, in a very cultured environment. His mom is a writer, his dad is a cellist. Scott's got an Oklahoma funk on him, like J.J. Cale, and that makes him by nature a very different kind of character and player, though Bela was his biggest influence. It's funny how the different regions of our country turn out players of a flavor, of a kind. The Tulsa guys have their thing, and the Memphis guys, like that. There's something spooky about that.

PM: Not just the players, but the songwriters, right? That's always been one of my favorite things to observe in Nashville. The Louisiana people write like this, and the North Carolina ones do it like that...

JC: And all the Texas guys have their own stroke, Townes and Guy and Steve, and all that.

PM: How about your drummer, Pasi Leppikangas, what's his story?

JC: He's a Canadian, go figure. He's basically a hard rock/fusion drummer. He could play in Metallica or Spirogyra.

PM: How'd you find him?

JC: Scott Vestal, the banjo player, brought him in. Everybody in the band came in through Scott.

PM: Including [new fiddle player] Luke Bulla?

JC: Yeah, Luke's just 21. He played in Ricky Skaggs' Kentucky Thunder for a couple of years, and he grew up in the Northwest. He was part of a band with his parents and sister called The Bullas. He's a championship fiddler, won Weiser [Idaho] and the Grand Masters, he's a real wunderkind.

PM: Ricky Skaggs is certainly famous for finding the young prodigies, Bill Monroe-style. I just saw him play for that taping of the Bluegrass Celebration for PBS, and he had these two young flatpickers that were frightening. Pretty close set eyes, fingers like pistons. [laughs]

You know what I like, too, is that your band sounded a lot different on your record than they did backing up Drew Emmitt on *Freedom Ride*. That's a good trick.

JC: Well, you know, different music, different enough.

PM: I think one way that your music is different from that is the way you lean. Bluegrass, no less than jazz now, has become synonymous with pushing the envelope in various directions, and the way you push is toward rock. [There is a cover of the famous Yes song on their new CD, "Long Distance Runaround."] Is that distinguishing characteristic a conscious thing?

JC: I don't think so. It's just what I cut my teeth on, you know. Until I joined Newgrass, I played in bands that did Little Feat and Allman Brothers and Yes, stuff like that. When I was really young, and you're the same age as me, when I was learning to play bass, I went out and bought "Knock On Wood." I can remember that Stax 45 in my hand with the blue green label, and putting it on. Learning to play "Knock On Wood" with Duck Dunn on the bass.

PM: That's funny. I remember my two brothers and I getting rid of a drummer who couldn't play "Knock On Wood" when I was 14.

JC: So, as a player, and certainly as a singer, my energy and roots come from that place. Not just rock & roll, but soul and R&B. I mean, I love Bill Monroe. But I wasn't about to sing like that, it would have been an affectation. So I just sing like I sing naturally. For me, it's all about Stevie Wonder and Mavis Staples. And Aretha, those are the people I sat and listened to for hours and hours.

PM: And one can certainly hear all that in every note you sing. Do you still do tons of session work?

JC: I don't do tons of it, I really don't.

PM: Did you at one time, or is it a more steady or even occasional thing?

JC: It's kind of a trickling thing, really. I think that one of the reasons I don't is that, although I know how to blend vocally and sound anonymous, people usually call me because they want me to do me, you know? So, for better or for worse, that's usually how it's worked.

PM: Doesn't Travis Tritt use you regularly, for example?

JC: Yeah, you'll find me on his records.

PM: So, you seem to be really working it this summer, a lot of dates. How's it going out there, and what's the timbre of the project, as it were?

JC: It feels good. I think this record is much better than the last one. The last one was me asking "Okay, who am I?" Now I've had a good band for the last three years, and I used them on the record. The last record, I assembled all these songs, and didn't even play on any of it. It was okay for a first statement. I like it, but this is different. We're in our sophomore season as a team. And we're getting some legs. Basically, I started over from scratch. It hasn't been easy—we're not riding around in a bus, I'm 48 and we're slugging it out in a van like I did all through my twenties, thirties, and forties.

PM: That's gotta feel pretty challenging.

JC: It is, it really is.

PM: So, tell me, how did it come to pass that you found yourself having to start over?

JC: When I got out of Newgrass, I floundered around for a bit. I had this kind of Bad Company/Aerosmith kind of band, and we had a record deal on Atlantic. That was called Dr. Nick. It was in development for two and a half years, and then the guy that signed us left the label, and they eventually dropped us. Then we bounced around with this project called The Sky Kings for about five years.

PM: I remember that; that went on for five years?

JC: Oh yeah. We made two different records for two different labels.

PM: Damn.

JC: And, to keep bread on the table, as you know, I played with the Doobie Brothers for three years.

PM: What were you doing with The Doobies, playing bass?

JC: Playing bass, singing background. And then, around '96, Sam asked how I felt about joining his band. Not as a partner this time around, but with him as the leader. I love Sam

so dearly as a person, I said sure, I'd do it. And it kind of reintroduced me to the world that I'd left behind, the Newgrass world. So I did that for a couple of years, I thought I'd try it again in that world with my own outfit. I know it looks crazy on paper, but there's something that works with this Rock/R&B voice I've got over a banjo, I don't know why. There's a compact version of the last ten years, and how it happens that I found myself starting over again, in effect.

PM: Who is John Gulley, the author of that fabulous song [on the record] "My Father's Field"?

JC: He's a guy that I met from Canada, about seven years ago. He came up to me in The Bluebird Café, a little strange looking guy, shaved head, big bug eyes and glasses. He was like a character in a Disney cartoon. He told me he was a fan, kind of aggressive, but not obnoxious. He said he'd sure like to write with me sometime, so I gave him my number, and he pursued it. He lives up in Barrie, Ontario, and is also a terrific songwriter. He produces records and is one helluva gut string guitar player. All the big chords and beautiful voicings. He's kind of like Kenny Rankin, if you remember him. That's John Gulley.

PM: Speaking of great songwriters, that's a typically soulful song that our friend Danny Flowers wrote about the Oklahoma tragedy, "Read On."

JC: Well, Danny made a record that you probably know about, *Forbidden Fruits and Vegetables*, which is a real gem. He asked me to sing all the background on his version of that song. I just thought the song was so strong lyrically that I just wanted to do it. So we started working it into the live show, and people in the crowd would come up in tears afterward. It's one of those simple, succinct, powerfully spiritual songs.

PM: Yeah, and he's just one of those guys that are capable of writing that.

JC: Exactly, and I found it from working with him.

PM: I'm happy to see what a good songwriter you've become yourself, and in esteemed company. That's got to feel like a whole new part of your life opened up in your thirties.

JC: Yeah, it has. And that's a scary proposition for all of us, to get naked that way. But I think it's the only way to go.

PM: Because, as a singer, no one can judge you, really. They may or may not relate to your style, but they certainly know you're hella good. But as a writer, anybody is a target for criticism, and everybody is a critic.

JC: Performing is just like falling off a log for me; I've been doing it since I was fourteen. Songwriting is a whole different task. It takes hard work and discipline, and all the things I don't like. [laughter] But the people that inspire me most are the great songwriters. Whether they're narrative writers, or personal writers, they just inspire you

with the truth, fact or fiction. I mean, guys like Tim O'Brien and Darrell Scott, they've just always done it. And they're both the rare combination of great instrumentalists and vocalists that are also gifted songwriters.

PM: And it's amazing to hear Darrell speak about his songwriting process with Tim. He says they'll hang out a helluva lot, and a small fraction of that time will actually be spent in writing. But when they do that, they both let all their guards down, and write from that really childlike, vulnerable place where magic can occur.

So, how has the response been so far for *Always Take Me Back*? And how is it working with Sugar Hill records?

JC: They're great. Because of Dolly Parton and Nickel Creek [both very successful releases for a small Bluegrass label] they have some money in the coffers, and have increased their presence in the music business. They've always been an artist oriented outfit, but it was basically, "Here's your small budget for a record, let us know when you're done." They never told you what to do, but you could only do so much. It used to be "What's Sugar Hill?" "Oh, that's that little bluegrass label." That's just not the case anymore.

PM: I know that Nickel Creek went gold [500k units] a while back, did Dolly's record go gold as well?

JC: I think so. They've got a mighty little roar going now. It's a pretty organic company. It's real nice to be there. I've known Barry, the owner, since soon after the label began. Newgrass made two records for them right when Bela and Pat joined the band. A live record and a studio record. So my relationship with them is long standing, and very comfortable. We have some of the good things that you get with a major label, and we don't have a lot of the bullshit that you get with a major label.

PM: So you're getting some promotion from the label, right?

JC: Yeah, we are.

PM: I watch some radio lists, looks like you're getting good play.

JC: Yeah, last week it was the most added at Americana. It's not like being the most added at Country radio, but it's something, for sure. I'm just glad that we all have this outlet that we never had before [the AAA or Americana radio format]. The thing that was so hard for groups like Newgrass the 16 years we were together was that there was absolutely no radio airplay possible, and there was no Internet. Just slug it out in the van, one gig at a time, and try to build your audience. So, that's changed. Most major cities and many college towns have an Americana station, or an NPR station. And XM Radio [satellite radio] is very big on Americana programming as well.

PM: And it looks like that's going to be a big thing in the foreseeable future, though they've been saying that for some time.

JC: Oh, I think so. I think it's a handful of years down the road, but I definitely think people are going to have satellite radios in their cars routinely.

PM: Lord knows, I try to listen to Country radio when I'm in the mood for writing for that market, and the only thing more painful than the programmed music itself are the commercials. I can't listen to that, no way. I listen mostly to NPR or CDs. So I look forward to XM radio, for sure.

So, what are you projecting for the days and the years ahead?

JC: Well, I'm real inspired to keep writing, continuing to make more personal records. Just go out and play. It's a good life. My only goal is to get in the bus, Frank. [laughs]

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