

John Gorka's career as a singer songwriter appears charmed, filled with good breaks and good luck. It brings to mind what a friend of mine says: "The harder I work, the luckier I get." Anyone who knows John Gorka will tell you that he's been after it relentlessly since the mid-80s, and has clearly risen to the top of the field. After cutting his teeth at a great listening room in eastern PA called Godfrey Daniels and becoming a regular in Jack Hardy's Fast Folk crowd in NYC, he got off to a flying start when Red House Records and Fleming Tamulevitch & Associates booking picked him up simultaneously in 1987. FTA are the agents that veritably control the folk world, and Red House one of the most distinguished and coveted labels. John plays up to 150 shows a year at every venue that books singer songwriters, and has earned a fan base that will probably sustain his career the rest of his natural life, along with the new believers each year brings.

After two records with Red House, John made five with Windham Hill's High Street Records, all to critical acclaim. In search of a more art, less commerce approach to his music, Gorka's happily back with his original label on the last two records. His latest pearl is called *The Company You Keep*. The most important company he's keeping these days are his wife and two kids outside of St. Paul, MN, and I hear them featured in spirit throughout. I hadn't heard a record of John's in some years when the new one appeared in the mailbox, and I didn't know what to expect. The bittersweet bounce of the first song and the soulful honesty of his baritone grabbed me more than just as reviewer or music lover—it spoke to me as a fellow human being. There's a relaxed maturity and absence of road perfected cleverness that I was happy to hear. He's a very wise person, and has a lot to offer.

We're from the same part of PA, and were a little acquainted, so a homey conversation follows. (John's originally from Colonia, NJ, as many of his fans know—his funny song "I'm from New Jersey" is a concert staple.) Unfortunately, my little Radio Shack tele-recorder was acting up in a major way, but I think the interview is intact, more or less. I'll fill in the blanks, and get a better recorder...

*The Company You Keep* includes some of John's fast company—Mary Chapin Carpenter, Ani DiFranco, Lucy Kaplansky, Patty Larkin, and co-producer Andy Stochansky (Ani's percussionist) whose playing on the disc is exemplary throughout. Here's a Puremusic guarantee that this will be a sterling addition to your collection of modern folk music, which is alive and well. The punchline from "A Saint's Complaint" opines that "good things come to those who ain't." Fortunately, good things come to those who are, as well.

**PM:** John?

**JG:** Is this Frank?

**PM:** It is, indeed. How are you, man?

**JG:** I'm doing good, how are you?

**PM:** Life's great, thanks. You're on the road at the moment?

**JG:** I'm at home right now, got home yesterday.

**PM:** Good, I'm glad I caught you at home.

**JG:** I just played in Kansas, it was really fun. I played with a symphony orchestra there, it was a new world experience.

**PM:** Who did the charts for that?

**JG:** The director of the symphony. He really liked my music, and has for a long time. We used the new record, so we had something to practice to, and something that I could listen to, so I could remember how I did them! I got in Saturday night, and ran over them before the show. Also there was a little band that acted as a rhythm section and nucleus for the orchestra, it worked out really well.

**PM:** So, we'll start the interview proper. On a scale of ten, how is life?

**JG:** It's very good. On that scale, it's pretty high up there. We have two kids now, so that's the biggest change in the last few years for me. That's the focus of things, and I'm trying to do all I can to keep it balanced. Our boy was three in October, and our girl is just fourteen months.

**PM:** What's your wife's name? How'd you meet?

**JG:** Laurie. She was the program director of The Nature Center, she put on a music festival with Bob Feldman, the head of Red House Records, so I met her in 1988. I got married to her when I was 38, and we were lucky to have had kids so quickly.

**PM:** Speaking of Red House, I'll bet it's good to be back.

**JG:** It's a better fit, I think. It's more musically oriented, in a sympathetic way, than where I'd been.

**PM:** I haven't heard all the records you've done, but on all I've heard, you seem to stick to your folk guns closely. It's not folk pop, it's not country pop enough to really get cut in that market, it's modern folk.

**JG:** It doesn't really fit in any radio format that I know of. That's partly what's good about it, but also what makes it hard for the record company to market. The songs are too long to be played on the radio, or not this enough or that enough.

**PM:** But folk is really where you're coming from.

**JG:** Yeah, I think so. I don't know if it is folk music, I hope that it could be. But I try to start with the sparks that come my way, then try to keep them alive through the whole process—and try to fuel them, rather than mold them into some box where they might fit.

**PM:** Well, it seems to be working, you may be the best folk guy out there at the moment. I'm real happy about that, and proud of you.

**JG:** Oh, well, thanks a lot. After the whole record company thing, I wanted to continue in some way that felt right... "When I Lost My Faith in People" is kind of about that, and also about losing faith in myself. I wasn't sure whether I had anything to offer that was worth anybody's time, I guess that's about the best way I can put it. And finding out that I'd been able to reach more people than I thought I had, and also the way I've been able to reach people live, that helped a lot.

**PM:** Along those lines, I remember seeing you perform twice, including last summer at the Appel Farm Folk Festival in NJ. Your stage persona is very endearing, and very personal. How does your onstage persona differ from your offstage personality, who do your friends know you to be?

**JG:** I'm probably not as outgoing offstage, my persona onstage is what I'd like to be. In some ways, I'm more comfortable speaking to a crowd than I am to a small group of people. I'm not trying to be anything that I'm not, it's more a question of trying to become more who I want to be offstage.

**PM:** Yeah, when I saw Vance Gilbert onstage recently, he was so effusive that it actually rubbed me the wrong way, but a performer friend told me that, offstage, he's actually a very nice, mellow character.

**JG:** He's a very outgoing performer. He's got a lot going on, his last record helped to shore up the songwriter side of him, as opposed to his gregarious onstage image.

**PM:** What town was it that you grew up in, in NJ?

**JG:** Colonia, near Edison and Rahway.

**PM:** After living there and in PA, how do you like Minnesota, what's it like up there?

**JG:** It's OK, the winters are rough, and this has been a very long and cold one.

**PM:** Are you guys in the city, suburbs, or country?

**JG:** Northeast of St. Paul, more out in the country.

**PM:** Who are your big influences, musically or otherwise?

**JG:** The people that I heard on records that inspired me, well, it was the Battles and then everybody else. Ray Charles, I love his music, and I listened to Joni Mitchell quite a bit. And Frank Sinatra.

**PM:** Are there any new influences moving you?

**JG:** Let's see, Ani DiFranco is someone I admire.

**PM:** Man, I just saw a new picture of her in the paper, holy geez, was it cute. [John laughs.] I mean, what happened to that quirky look of yesterday, she looks like a model now.

**JG:** She has so many different looks. As an artist, she's always changing, and probably gets bored with the way she looks, you know. She probably doesn't want people to put her in any one slot.

**PM:** Who's your favorite guitar player, John?

**JG:** Oh, boy...right off the bat, I'd have to say Leo Kottke.

**PM:** Do you have a favorite lyricist?

**JG:** I like Leonard Cohen, Joni Mitchell, and Janis Ian.

**PM:** Well, those are three hot ones.

**JG:** And Paul Simon is great.

**PM:** Overall, including the music, who would you say is the songwriter you most admire?

**JG:** Irving Berlin is someone I've always liked. The way he was able to say so much so simply. It's not the kind of stuff that I would write, but I love his songs.

**PM:** Sure, simplicity is something we're all striving for.

**JG:** Yeah, I think so. Trying to get down to the nature of things, or to the preconceptions, the givens, something along that line.

**PM:** I think I follow.

**JG:** Like in science, there are assumptions that precede a scientific proof of something.

**PM:** Right.

**JG:** It even applies to my current obsession of the last few years, home recording, and sound. The technical end of things, how sounds are made and captured.

**PM:** What equipment are you using?

**JG:** It's kind of the house of many formats here, my current center of things is the computer. I'm running out of room and have a little corner of the house for my stuff, so it makes better sense. I also have an analog 8 track recorder, some ADATs, a hard disk recorder...

**PM:** That is many formats. Do you have the Roland 16 track hard disk system?

**JG:** Actually, I have the E-MUs hooked up to the Roland DM800, the predecessor of the new 8 and 16 tracks on the market now. It's all synched up together. I'd like to learn to do it all, but I know that the best music you can make is with other people. Things happen in that situation that you could never overdub in your home studio.

**PM:** And you've stuck with Martin guitars, a tried and true Pennsylvanian.

**JG:** I had an old one that I've written with, and in the meantime had a Lowden and a Larivee that I liked a lot, they were really good road guitars. The Martin I'm using now, they gave me that a couple of years ago, Dick Boak and Martin. They saw me play at Godfrey Daniels, and schemed it up. They said, "We hope you play it, but you're not obligated to." It wasn't an endorsement deal, but a gift. It was one of those good things that happened, that made me feel like I was doing something worthwhile.

**PM:** [Since the recorder kept shutting off!] So, I want to make sure I get that model number, it's an OM-28VR.

**JG:** Right, the vintage reissue.

**PM:** You play any electric?

**JG:** I just got an electric guitar, for the home setup. I've been getting away from the technology end, and more interested again in just playing stuff. It's a Musicmaster, I believe, shaped like a Fender bass, single pickup.

**PM:** I like to play the Gibson jazz boxes, I have an old ES125. For those of us that crossed over from acoustic world, it's worth a look.

**JG:** I notice that sometimes when I play electric guitar, that I get a pain in the shoulder, I'm not used to having the body of the guitar so close to me, not having to reach out.

**PM:** I think we're all plagued by the shoulder pains of a life of playing guitar, right, they just never go away. [Commiserating laughter] So, it occurred to me while listening to this recent great CD that you are a spreader of hope, that's a commendable occupation. How do you feel about that?

**JG:** I'm surprised that it's come to this. I've turned into a hopeful guy, it's kind of a funny thing. In some ways, I feel like I've backed my way into a normal life. I started out a kind of road warrior, the opposite end of the domestic spectrum. Now I'm a dad, and try to spend time with the family, and do things around the house. I'm learning how to do that. [Laughs] I've learned how to fold clothes, after these years.

**PM:** I'll bet you're pretty good at diapers, too.

**JG:** Oh yeah.

**PM:** Do you have special spiritual leanings, Christianity or Buddhism, or something else?

**JG:** I was raised Catholic, so that did something. I don't classify myself, but I do believe in a God, just...

**PM:** You don't give him a name.

**JG:** Right. With music, I've always had a faith in myself that I could do it my own way, even though I knew it would be the hard way. But as far as confidence goes, it's been more absent than present.

**PM:** Even with all the acclaim, and all the good reviews, it's still like that?

**JG:** Yeah, I make my living from the live shows, and you're only as good as your last show. If I feel that I didn't do a good show, then I feel like, oh... Maybe that's the general New Jersey attitude, that you're never good enough. And I think that kind of attitude is an asset, you never feel like you've got it made. There's always more to learn, more work to do.

**PM:** Certainly not the makeup of a person who's going to rest on his laurels.

**JG:** I have to be reaching new people all the time. People aren't always going to be able to come to the show, especially if they have the obligations of family, and less free nights. So, I have to always be reaching new people, hopefully for as long as I live.

**PM:** I really liked the production on the new record, two Polish guys and a Ukrainian. [Gorka, Robb Genadek, and percussionist Andy Stochansky.] I think the Ukrainian's contribution is outstanding.

**JG:** Yeah, I really loved his playing. He's knowledgeable about different kinds of music, as well as visual arts, and movies.

**PM:** Seems like drummers and percussionists tend to know more about world music than string players do.

**JG:** Yeah, it's interesting. He added a lot, just as a presence. He has his own band now, doing his own music.

**PM:** Under his own name?

**JG:** Right, up in Canada, outside Toronto. He's done some tours in the US. He's very innovative. And Rob Genadek was much more than an engineer, he helped bring together a group of people that really made it happen. Aside from knowing all about mic placement and the treatment of sound, he was a very creative element in the process.

**PM:** Fatherhood considered, have you any time for reading?

**JG:** Mostly, I'm just reading the Harry Potter books right now. And *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, it's sort of an autobiography. It's mostly compiled, edited interviews, I don't think he wrote a lot down. But they were done with a book in mind.

**PM:** Do you think that folk is on the rise, at a plateau, or shrinking as a market?

**JG:** That's a good question. I think that there's more and more people doing it. It goes underground from time to time, and occasionally a big success will pop through commercially. But I think it's still going strong. Maybe they'll have some data on that after this Folk Alliance Convention is over in Vancouver this weekend. The Internet is changing things a little, but performers still have to become known first from their shows, and then build on that. And I think that will only become more important, it's the thing that can't be virtualized. That's where the magic always was. There were records that moved me without end, but it was seeing people perform live that made me want to do it. Godfrey Daniels is celebrating 25 years next month.

**PM:** That's amazing. Did you do a video for this record, is that part of the Red House budget?

**JG:** No. The way we did the first video, I did it with Chris Rogers, he's a Nashville guy. He liked the *I Know* record, and we did it for the cost of the equipment. "When She Kisses Me" got quite a lot of airplay. If there was another opportunity like that, I'd do it, of course. But there really isn't a budget for stuff like that. The main thing is still getting the word out by doing as many live shows as I can without wrecking the balance of family and career.

**PM:** How many folk acts out there are making a good living, in your opinion? I know that depends on what one means by a good living, but are really more than a dozen?

**JG:** And also on what you consider folk. I'd have to think about that. I'll bet there are more than you might imagine.

**PM:** I'd like to think so. I'd like to think there are 25, but then I try to count them. But there are many people willing to make a meager living to do the thing they love.

**JG:** Sure.

**PM:** I didn't notice anything in the liner notes about publishing. Are you your own publisher?

**JG:** Yes. I wonder if they forgot to put that in there.

**PM:** Do you ever try to write for other artists, or always for yourself?

**JG:** I try to write for myself, and then see if anything might be a good fit for someone else.

**PM:** Have other artists picked up on your material, folk or otherwise?

**JG:** A few, Mary Black has recorded quite a few songs. Maura O'Connell covered a few songs, and Edwin McCain covered "Let Them In."

**PM:** Edwin McCain? That had to do pretty well.

**JG:** Yeah, that helped.

**PM:** He sold hella records.

**JG:** Yeah.

**PM:** I like that guy, because he's not a poster child for anything but good singing.

**JG:** Exactly. And I thought he did a really good job on the song, too. He called it "Prayer for St. Peter" or something, on his last record.

**PM:** So, I'll ask you one more thing, and I pray to God that this piece of shit recorder actually worked. What goals are still on the horizon?

**JG:** [laughing] Well, I still want to keep working on songs. There are so many places you can go with a song, and for me it's still all about that. Chasing down the songs, and trying to make them as good as I can.

**PM:** Well, John, it was lovely to talk with you, and I hope to see you around the bend.

**JG:** Yeah, Frank, same here. Have you run into Steve Kimock at all? [John and I had talked some about my music, which I don't include here. Steve Kimock and I were bandmates in the Goodman Brothers, which was a band John liked back in his PA days.]

**PM:** Yes, it's interesting that you ask. I'll be reviewing a record of his in the same issue where you'll be featured.

**JG:** Oh, good. [After this, we reminisced about some old days, about Steve Kimock, talked about Ken Burns' Jazz program, different things...]

**PM:** Well, I hope to see you again in Nashville before too long. I notice that Ani Difranco is playing the Ryman soon, I'd like to see you there.

**JG:** Yeah, I opened for Mary Chapin Carpenter there once. Thanks a lot for doing this, and I'll check out PureMusic. Say hello to your brother Billy for me.

**PM:** OK buddy, take care.

**JG:** You too, Frank. See you soon.