

A Conversation with Mary Gauthier
by Frank Goodman (Puremusic.com, 5/2004)

Rarely is a more interesting story more frankly told than that of Mary Gauthier. (That's "go-shay," by the way.) Given up at birth by a mother she never knew, Mary bounced around right from the top and was adopted by parents of the Italian Catholic persuasion in Thibodoux, LA. She was a classic wild child—gay bars, detox, even prison, before she straightened out. Studied Philosophy at L.S.U., then attended Cambridge School of Culinary Arts, and founded Boston's first Cajun restaurant—drinking all the way, right up to opening night. But she'll share that story in the interview.

Three big turnarounds encapsulate the story of Mary: rising above a dangerously errant youth, getting sober, and becoming a professional and heralded singer songwriter by not writing her first songs until her mid-thirties. That, and then writing so well from such a visceral and gut wrenching place that it resonates with the press, her heroes, and the audience alike that it rockets her to the #1 spot in *The New York Times* and *No Depression*, to name but a significant pair.

Starting so late and rising so quickly, I don't know any other stories in music like that. And it's still hard, and she's still rising. After two self-released efforts (*Dixie Kitchen* and the much lauded *Drag Queens in Limousines*) and one on Signature Sounds (*Filth and Fire*, see our review), she's on the verge of a big label deal, and a much bigger push.

Mary is genuine and forthcoming, which makes for a charming interview. I also found it very interesting talking with a songwriter who'd come to it late, so that some of the myopia was missing, to my perception. I don't know why so many artists and would-be artists are so tediously self-absorbed, it's truly unbecoming. That self-delusional aspect one too often finds among this group was also refreshingly absent. Grinding out long hours in one's own restaurant day after day puts you and keeps you on your feet, one is led to assume.

Gauthier's stock in trade is deep portraiture of the disenfranchised and edgier characters among us, and the darker corners of the heart and soul. She shows the hard-earned knowledge of herself in her understanding and compassion for the stories of others, which she tells so well.

For a person known for material on the grave side, Mary is really upbeat and a pleasure to know. Get to know her yourself, in this revealing conversation. Don't forget the clips on the Listen page when you're done, and pick up *Filth and Fire* (if you haven't already) while we await her imminent big label debut.

Puremusic: Where do we find you today and what's going on in your life lately?

Mary Gauthier: Well, I'm opening for John Prine in San Antonio and Fort Worth. And I just did my own shows, night before last in Austin and Houston last night, so I'll be getting on the road in a little bit and heading over to San Antonio.

PM: It's a beautiful thing, the level of guys that you're opening for, like John Prine, Guy Clark.

MG: Pretty cool, huh?

PM: It's frickin amazing.

MG: [laughs]

PM: And we'll get to that and how that happened. There's so much about your story that's compelling, and we'll try and cover some of the history, such as we know it, in the setup. But let's pick up your saga, if you would, where you decide to close your restaurant and make your first record, *Dixie Chicken*. How did you get the gumption to make that change in your life?

MG: Well, the first record, I named it after my restaurant which is *Dixie Kitchen*.

PM: *Dixie Kitchen*. What did I say?

MG: *Dixie Chicken*—which everybody does, because I took the name of the restaurant off that Lowell George song.

PM: Yeah, of course.

MG: And it was just a stroke of genius when it occurred to me that I could call a Cajun restaurant *Dixie Kitchen*. I was listening to that Little Feat song on the radio, and it came through: *Dixie Chicken*, *Dixie Kitchen*.

[laughter]

MG: So everybody makes that mistake, and that's reasonable since that's where the name came from.

PM: Was that a good restaurant?

MG: It was a great run. I had a great run there.

PM: How long was that up?

MG: I ran that for about eleven years.

PM: Eleven years, wow.

MG: Yeah.

PM: And how many seats was that?

MG: It was 96 seats.

PM: Oh, my God!

MG: Right next to Berklee Performance Center, Berklee College, the music school in Boston.

PM: Oh, so you had music people galore.

MG: I had musicians in and out every day. And Symphony Hall was down the street, too, so it was definitely a musicians hangout.

PM: Longhairs and jazzbos and every kind of thing.

MG: It was really cool.

PM: Now, as a person who was to eventually change her life and become a professional musician yourself, was that move incubating all along with so many music people walking in and out of your other business?

MG: No, not really. To be perfectly honest, I was pretty oblivious to the—I mean, I was in the kitchen most of the time working like a dog.

PM: Right. You weren't with the people, you were in the back.

MG: I was cooking. And I went to work every day and wore a chef coat, and I was the day chef. So I spent most of my days checking in orders, cooking, placing orders, making sure everything was in running condition, and working the rushes. Even though I was owner of the place, there were so many things to do that I never really had a chance to sit out there and talk to people.

PM: Well, then—

MG: How did it all come to be?

PM: Yeah. How did you make that shift? I mean, that's such a remarkable shift.

MG: It is. It's crazy.

PM: Yeah.

MG: What happened was: opening night of the restaurant, July 13th, 1990, I was arrested for drunk driving. We had a big party, and I got really drunk. I had been struggling with booze and drugs all my life, anyway. And it culminated in being arrested opening night. That was the day I quit drinking. My sobriety coincided with the opening of the restaurant.

It's pretty cool, the way it unfolded. To look back on it now, it just seems so amazing. I thought it was the worst thing that could have ever happened to me, getting arrested on opening night of a restaurant, having my name in the paper and having to be bailed out by my business partners who had just invested a ton of money in the restaurant. I was humiliated and ashamed and guilty as hell.

And I just decided not to fight it anymore. I went in front of the judge and pled guilty and told my partners I had a drinking problem. And I went and got the help that I needed.

That started me on a whole new path—although I didn't feel it happening in me. It took about three years sober before I started writing. But at five years sober, I had written a couple songs. And by seven years sober, I wanted out. I just wanted out of the restaurant. That wasn't my calling. That was something I could do successfully—as a drunk, really. It was my third restaurant. But I couldn't write and drink, which is strange, because so many writers are just the opposite. They couldn't possibly run a business, but they could certainly write and drink.

PM: Right.

MG: But for me, it was very different. I just couldn't. I couldn't put my thoughts together. I could multitask like a lunatic, but I couldn't sit down and be still and channel the muse that's required to write the way that I write. So as my soul started to heal, it took a long time, but I was starting to quiet down internally, and that's when I began being able to write.

And slowly but surely I wanted to write more than I wanted to cook. I started going to these open mics and trying out my songs on, basically, other songwriters. And it just became an obsession. Eventually I had my business partners buy me out. I took the money from the buyout and made my second CD [*Drag Queens in Limousines*], and hired a radio promoter, and hired a publicist, and put together what press clippings I had and tried to write a bio and get into the music business.

PM: That was a big step. And you had the business sense by then to say, “Okay, if I'm going to do this right, with my second record, I've got to get some radio promo and some publicity.” Who did you hire back then?

MG: I hired Bill Wence in Nashville to do the radio. And I hired Ellen Giurleo in Boston to do the publicity. I met a woman at a Folk Alliance who was managing a couple of

people, and I called her up and asked her if she would help with PR as well. And she grew into becoming my first manager. Her name is Marlene Baker.

PM: Oh, yeah. And Marlene, does she still handle you?

MG: No, I'm actually in between managers, and doing this record deal. I spent a few minutes with another manager, and that didn't work out, so I'm just sort of in between, and waiting on the deal to finalize, and then I'll figure out what's going to happen with management.

PM: Very interesting.

MG: But yeah, Marlene got on board, and I put the money that I'd made from the restaurant into production of the CD and hiring the people that you need for a CD release to have any success. And I hit the road. At that point I was making \$50 a night and working anywhere that would have me, and just trying to figure out the business of writing songs, making CDs, and playing music for a living.

PM: So who produced that second album?

MG: The same producer as the first one, Crit Harmon.

PM: Oh, Crit Harmon did both of the first two.

MG: Yeah.

PM: We may talk about Gurf Morlix [producer of *Filth and Fire*] a little later—but how would you characterize your relationship with Crit, and the way that he works?

MG: Crit and Gurf have a lot in common. They're both very, very kind, which I think is just vital. And they're very patient. They're both very, very talented. And they know how to talk to someone in the studio to get the best performance. I mean, just the slight raising of the eyebrows can cause a person like me to crumble.

PM: Go to pieces.

MG: Yeah. You look at me like I just sang bad, and I just—I can't sing again. It's probably not that bad now, but it was then, because I always have struggled with my singing voice.

PM: Because Crit was dealing with a much younger artist than Gurf was by the time you got to him.

MG: Oh, yeah. I was green, green, green. And I sang really, really pitchy. I didn't learn how to deal with that until much later on. I finally figured out I was singing too hard. I was pushing instead of letting it flow, and pushing always made it go flat.

PM: Right.

MG: Crit was so gentle with me and so generous with the way that he handled me. He helped develop my confidence, and he helped me with the songs. Most of my best songs on the first three records were co-writes with Crit. And he was instrumental in helping me to grow.

And I really do think kindness is so important when you're dealing with such an intimate thing as someone's songs and singing, especially with a young artist who's not young. I got started at this at thirty-five.

PM: That's remarkable.

MG: So I was an old young artist.

PM: Right.

MG: And I had known success in other areas of my life, but this was brand new. But given that I was still newly sober, by whole life was brand new. I went to my first detox when I was 15.

PM: Wow!

MG: I had struggled since I was just a little kid with the demons associated with drugs and alcohol, and alcoholism. But I felt like a baby in so many ways. Emotionally, I was a baby, and just raw. And these songs were pouring out of me. I wanted to chase it. I needed that man or woman who had the kindness and gentleness to deal with someone that vulnerable, and Crit was just perfect.

PM: It's no wonder that he gets so much work from so many good singer songwriters, I mean, if he's all that.

MG: Oh, yeah.

PM: So when you hit the road at fifty bucks a night and gigs like that, and you had some publicity and some radio promo, that second record, *Drag Queens in Limousines*, hit pretty good with the critics in Triple A Radio, did it not?

MG: All hell broke loose.

PM: Yeah.

MG: I went from never playing with a band in my whole life, doing \$50 a night gigs at coffeehouses trying to sing in between them making cappuccino to suddenly I'm on the

main stage at the Newport Folk Festival, overnight, and main stage Strawberry Music Festival, Rocky Mountain Folk Festival.

PM: And how did it happen? Just a shitload of airplay?

MG: The record did it. What happened was, Bob Jones at Newport fell in love with the record. And once Newport books you as their new artist that year...

PM: Right.

MG: I think these guys watch each other, I really do. The festival talent buyers. It's no coincidence that the same two or three people who get the New Artist slot at one festival get it at most of the festivals.

PM: Exactly. "We're getting on board here."

MG: Yeah. So once Bob Jones invited me, then they just fell like dominos, and I couldn't even believe it. When that call came in, I didn't believe it. I just said, "No, come on." "Yeah, yeah. You got Newport." And to me it was like God called and said, "You're not a sinner after all," or something.

[laughter]

PM: Yeah, "I love you anyway."

MG: Yeah! It's like, "You're forgiven! I realize there were some mistakes, but you're still a child of mine."

PM: [laughs]

MG: It was just unbelievable. So then I had figure shit out really, really quickly. And there was Crit, once again, helping me put a band together, helping me to play with a band. He was my guitar player.

PM: Oh, really? He did Newport with you.

MG: Oh, yeah.

PM: And he was the band leader and stuff like that.

MG: Yeah.

PM: He was a really valuable ally when you needed him.

MG: Oh, yeah.

PM: And so how did Newport go? Was it a big success?

MG: It was incredible. It was just incredible. I don't know if I'll ever—I mean, I could probably win a Grammy and never have that feeling, of going from—you know, my life was in the toilet. I mean, I really was low, low, low. And in a couple years I felt like I couldn't do anything wrong, like everything was just amazing, sliding into place without me putting that much effort into it. I mean, I put a lot of effort into writing those songs, and the rest of it just fell into place. I think, honestly—and I know this is going to sound silly, but—so much of the music business really is about the songs.

PM: [laughs]

MG: I mean, we're at that stage in music business history where everyone is convinced it's not about the songs, it's about huge PR, it's about sex appeal, it's about buying slots on radio, it's about purchasing magazine covers, it's about the big money push behind an artist. But that wasn't my experience. I had none of those things, and the songs broke through anyway. So I can't help but say, from my experience, that the songs really, really do matter.

PM: And I think it's most true in singer songwriter world, that the songs talk louder than anything.

MG: I think so.

PM: That's what makes it a really interesting market for grownups, because it's not all the external forces, all the tangential factors that are speaking. It's the central factors that are speaking. It's the tunes themselves.

MG: Yes. If the songs are crafted strongly enough, and if they're real and true enough, and you tell the story properly, a song has a power to crawl into someone's heart and make them feel something, and make them care about something. I was blessed with several songs that did that, and it completely changed my life.

PM: What are the songs that most changed your life, do you think, at that time?

MG: The song "I Drink" has been such a door opener for me. People love that song. When Crit and I wrote that song, I had no idea the power it would have all over the world.

PM: Is he much of a drinker?

MG: Ironically, I wrote "I Drink" as a sober person.

PM: Ah.

MG: It was me looking at what my life could have been like if I hadn't quit drinking. But I never mention that in the song, of course. The character in the song was someone who was an alcoholic. It was me hypothesizing about me, as if I never stopped drinking and what it would have been like. And that song has opened so many doors for me.

And then the story of the woman executed in Texas, it has the power to move people. It's just the story of what happened to her as I saw it. But with a story song, you have to lay the song out perfectly. One bad move, and a story song doesn't work. So the craftsmanship on it—those songs took about a year each to write. A year of just really, really rewriting. And rewriting, and rewriting. I probably did three or four hundred rewrites on both of those songs.

PM: Oh, that's beautiful. I think all songwriters need to hear that. That's incredible. Three or four hundred rewrites!?

MG: The thing is, Crit wouldn't let me stop. He kept saying, "It ain't right. It ain't right. It can be better, it can be better. It's so close. It's got to be perfect." I mean, I was ready to just put forks in my eyes. "This is the best I can do. This is it." "No, it ain't it. There's something wrong. I don't know what's wrong, but something ain't right."

PM: I was writing with a really good guy today, and we were picking out the lines that were not great. And he reminded me of something that Townes said. He said, "Hey, I'm competing with Mozart and Lightning Hopkins here. I can't accept any throwaway lines."

[laughter]

MG: The world doesn't need any more pretty good songs. There are way too many already. It needs to be great. And in order for it to be great, unless you're Dylan or Townes or Guy Clark or somebody who just has this amazingly huge natural talent, you've got to work your ass off. I'm one of those who can get to a great song if I work my ass off. But it doesn't come naturally, and it doesn't come easily. I mean, it's work. It makes restaurant work look like child's play, because every time you improve a line, then the whole rest of the song has to be improved.

PM: Right. So often the house of cards comes down with one great line.

MG: Oh, yeah! Oh, yeah. And suddenly your best line is your worst line, because you just topped it.

PM: [laughs]

MG: And now it's, "Ah, shit. Now I've got to go back." It's a patience game, it's a persistence game. But I know when I'm there, when the hairs on my own arm raise, and I feel the goose bumps on my arms come up. I know I got it then, because that's what the truth and a great story will do to a human being, you feel it physically.

PM: Yeah.

MG: And until I get there, I'm not there yet.

PM: And I think it's really wrong to exhibit a lack of patience with a song. I mean, it wasn't long ago a guy came over to write something, and he says, "Well, let's tie this up. This is like our fifth meeting on this song." And I look at him and I say, "What are you talking about? So what do we got, 20 hours into this song? What's the big deal, man?"

MG: Yeah. Well, the big deal is that he's got a staff writer's job and he needs to turn twelve in a year.

PM: [laughs]

MG: And so it becomes, "Let's just throw it together and make it good—great is too hard—and move on to the next one."

PM: Right.

MG: Because he just wants to earn his paycheck. See, I'm not that kind of a songwriter. I don't do staff writer deals. I'm not interested in what Faith Hill wants to record next. I think that's at war with what I do. What I'm trying to do is create something that's going to last a lot longer than me. So it means I'm not that prolific. It means that it can take me a year to write a song. It means that I'm tortured. I mean, I can end up in a fetal position over trying to find the right word. I know it's out there. I know it's out there. But damn it, where is it? [laughs]

PM: I mean, unless it's a really happy song, if I haven't cried over a song, I think it's bullshit. You know?

MG: Yeah. And those songs, you can't write fifty of those a year. I mean, it depends. These generalizations are tough, because there's always going to be an exception.

PM: Sure.

MG: But I know that there's not that many of those songs for me. But I'd rather write a whole lot less and have the songs be really, really, really good. Because I'm not trying to run a race, or play the "whoever's got the most songs wins" game. It's not that for me. Being a singer songwriter and being on the road and making CDs, I am sort of in control of the pace that I do it at. And fortunately I'm lucky enough to be able to take my time with it.

PM: You've created a niche for yourself in some pretty high profile singer songwriter situations. Have you run into singer songwriters lately or in the last couple of years who really blew you away, ones who may not be famous and that we should mention?

MG: Yeah. I'm on a Canadian spree right now. I love the new Lynn Miles CD. And I'm always going to be a Fred-head.

PM: Oh, yeah, Fred, for sure.

MG: No doubt about it, Fred [Eaglesmith] is one of the guys who just keeps writing great songs. And I just love him. I love what he does. I love his spirit. I'm a huge, huge Fred-head. And there's a guy I met when I played some festivals in Canada last summer, named David Francey. I really, really like him.

PM: I've been hearing about him.

MG: And I still get bootlegs a lot on the road, and people compare me to Townes a whole lot, particularly in Europe. And they feel compelled to tell me that they were there the last time Townes played Berlin or Munich or Glasgow, and they have a bootleg of it, and they give it to me. And I listen to all these old bootlegs, and they're just great. They're just great. I listen to stuff people give me a lot. I don't know when was the last time I actually bought a record. I guess that happens once you get in the business.

PM: Yeah, it happens to a lot of people, I think. But I've digressed a little bit, Mary, pardon me. As big as *Drag Queens in Limousines* hit, and it hit really great, it was *Filth and Fire*, the next one, that made you #1 in *The New York Times* and *No Depression* and all that. I mean, it just kept getting better, right?

MG: To be honest with you, I've been working so hard I haven't had a chance to sit back and reflect on what I've done. I'm always setting goals and trying to reach them, and I haven't really sat back and said, "Oh, look what you've done." Over the last few months, everything has really come down to this record deal that I'm doing, and there haven't been a lot of gigs. So I've been able to sort of reflect. It is kind of quick. It didn't feel quick when it was happening. It felt slow, and I wanted more and I wanted more and I wanted more. But looking back on it now, hell, I've only been out of the restaurant two and a half years, three years—

PM: Oh, my God!

MG: —and I'm doing great!

PM: Oh, it's unbelievable. And it's totally unprecedented. Before we get to your imminent Record deal, how did the one with Signature Sounds for *Filth and Fire* come together?

MG: We shopped that around to everybody, and nobody wanted it.

PM: Nobody wanted it.

MG: Nobody wanted it.

PM: Even after *Drag Queens* hit so hard?

MG: Didn't want it. Didn't want it.

PM: What the hell is that about?

MG: I'm too old, basically, I think that's what it came down to.

PM: But you were good looking, so what's the rub?

MG: Well, not *that* good lookin'.

[laughter]

MG: Well, I don't know—I can't understand why they didn't want it, but nobody wanted it. And the few that did want it wanted to sign me for six records, and they wanted to own the masters, and it was just horrible. I mean, horrible record deals where I was going to be—

PM: A slave.

MG: A sharecropper, as Courtney Love would put it.

PM: Yeah, right.

MG: I was too business savvy and too—well, too old, actually, to be manipulated like that.

PM: Right.

MG: So Signature Sounds did a licensing deal with me. They agreed to do a one-off, which was what I wanted to do. I didn't want to get married before I dated somebody.

PM: Yeah, really.

MG: Unless they're putting some serious money on the table, which they weren't. So Signature licensed it from me, and they gave me a very fair deal. And Jim Olsen, who owns the company, believes in me. It just seemed like the right place to go. And besides, Fred was there. I thought, "If Fred is there, I should go there too."

PM: [laughs]

MG: What the hell, it can't be that bad, Fred doesn't make big mistakes. And I'm glad I did it. It was a good thing to do at the time, because now I own three of my records. If the worst case scenario were to happen with this big record deal, I've still got three records to

fall back on. You can't take away my career. Those records are how I pay my rent, and it's how I live. My performance fees have never really gone up that much. So that I can continue to work, I'll do deals with clubs that don't guarantee me very much, and do percentage deals so that they don't overextend themselves, knowing that when I go in I'll be able to sell CDs.

PM: That's really smart, Mary. That's really smart.

MG: And essentially, the fact that I'm older has worked for me. It really has worked for me, because I've been around enough to know basically how to cover my ass. And Fred has been a mentor. He's always been there for me when I have questions. And Taj Mahal has been a mentor.

PM: Really?

MG: Yeah, Taj is indie all the way. He showed me how to go do Europe and get sub-publishing deals. He does that every year, at Midem [big European Music Conference] if he has a CD. And these guys, they're willing to help other artists if you just ask them, and ask them to show you how they did it, they're more than willing to help you.

PM: I've interviewed both of those guys, and they're both fascinating characters.

MG: They're smart. They're not only great musicians, but they learn from their mistakes really quick. I mean, you can't avoid making some mistakes. That's impossible. That doesn't happen. But you can warn people about big mistakes not to make. You can tell them the mistakes you made, and offer your own wounds as a lesson so that they don't have to make them too. And I like artists helping each other, because the business ain't there to help you.

PM: Yeah. Nobody in the business is going to help you but another artist, that's for sure.

MG: Well, the business is there to help itself. Which isn't to say that's wrong. It's just that if artists are going to get any real help, it's going to have to be from each other.

PM: So the progression of your CDs that we've kind of outlined is just remarkable, self-released on one and two, you go to folk-prestigious Signature Sounds on three, and now you're headed for the comparative big time for number four. Let's talk about that.

MG: I haven't signed the deal yet, but I just got off the phone with the lawyer, and he said the final offer should be on the table Monday.

PM: Is it far enough along that we can mention their name?

MG: You can mention it. If it falls through, I'm sure I'll have a lesson or two that I've learned, and we can mention that. I think the deal should be done next week, though, and I'll probably sign it.

PM: And so it's going to be Lost Highway.

MG: It's going to be Lost Highway. Isn't that nuts, at my age?

PM: Amazing. Compared to Signature Sounds, of whom we're very big fans, Lost Highway must have a hell of a promo team that could send your career through a few other roofs.

MG: I hope so. You never know. The big appeal is that they can release worldwide simultaneously, so I can have an impact simultaneously around the world.

PM: Because—

MG: My strength is in Europe. I mean, the U.S. has been a struggle for me and it continues to be a struggle for me. I'm still pretty much an opening act here. But over in Europe, I'm playing theaters myself, solo.

PM: Let's go into that whole European topic, because it's so interesting to so many singer songwriters. And you just cracked it right off the bat. Obviously it is the nature of what you do that really appeals to the European mentality, because they like it real and they like it deep, and they don't want any bullshit. Americans like it a lot more cosmetic, they like a lot more "Hey, let's laugh it up between the songs," all that patter mentality. The Europeans want some heavy duty songs.

MG: What I found when I first went to Europe, I guess it was four years ago, was that there is a trail blazed there by Steve Earle, almost single handedly. Also Emmylou, and people of that ilk, Townes, and Guy when he used to go over a bit. They did the hard work, and I'm just walking that trail. The generation before me did the hard work. They went over there and created a market for this thing that's being called Americana music, which I tend to just call American music. And those fans are there for all of us. I'm just reaping the benefits, I honestly believe, of what they did.

PM: Yeah, but it's because of what you do that you're able to reap them.

MG: Yes. It's because I fit in that thing, the renegade, opinionated, willing to put it all on the table and be vulnerable type of singer songwriter.

PM: It's very interesting that there's no market whatsoever for mainstream country over there, but there's plenty of market for alternative country.

MG: Yes.

PM: And Triple A radio does better—Triple A artists do better there than they do here.

MG: Yes. That's a fact.

PM: But especially artists like you, the artists of substance.

MG: Yep. And it's a blessing, because we can go over there and make enough money to bring back over here to try to keep trying to get it going over here.

PM: That's right. So when you play theaters over there, do you play solo or do you use any players that you bring over or pick up there?

MG: Nope. I play solo. My thing has always been a guitar, a bar stool, a spotlight, and a glass of water.

PM: Nice.

MG: And it's just so simple. I'm sure the band thing is going to become necessary soon, and I'm looking forward to that. But the way that I've done it is so simple, there's not a whole lot of hassle to it. I hire somebody to drive me, and we sell CDs and do shows. And it just flows. I'm dependent on me. And I really like it.

PM: Yeah, I mean, if you can pull that off, that's just the way to go.

MG: The prototypes for me are people like Townes and Guy—you know, the word-crafter people. And that's what they do. Guy wouldn't be caught dead with a band at this point. He hated that shit.

PM: He did?

MG: Yeah, he did. He didn't like it. I mean, he'll hire a band to make a live record, and for maybe big festivals. But even big festivals now, Guy just goes out with Verlon [Thompson].

PM: Right. And when he does a record, it's just his friends anyway. It's Verlon and Sean [Camp] and Darrell [Scott] and Kenny [Malone], just the buddies, yeah.

MG: Yeah, exactly. And it works great. What is wrong with that?

PM: Yeah, nothing.

MG: It makes it possible to have joy [laughs] and be in the music business, to know what you like and know what you want and know yourself. I mean, the way that it's been for me has made it possible to not get in so far over my head so quickly. That first season out with the *Drag Queens* record, and I hired this big band, and I felt like I was carrying an anchor behind me. I got five guys, they all have needs, they all have wants, they all have wives and children. They need to make a certain amount of money, they need to have certain days off, they need to have this, need to have that. And it just—I wasn't able to handle all that very well. Plus, learning how to be a bandleader, I didn't have a clue.

Fortunately, I got started in Boston, and that's sort of the singer songwriter capitol, and they like you to just be up there with a guitar. And I learned how to do it, and I can handle it. Things are coming to a point where I'm going to need a band. But if I find it as difficult as I did the first time, I know I can just say, "You know, I'll handle this myself."

PM: Right.

MG: I think there's a lot of confidence that comes from knowing you can do it without them. That's kind of why I went to chef school early on in the restaurant business. I didn't really want to be a chef, but I knew that as the owner of a restaurant, if I couldn't jump in and do what the chef did, I would be at a disadvantage.

PM: Right. That's an interesting analogy. How do you characterize your spiritual life and how it shows up in the material?

MG: Well, it's an interesting journey for me. When I first quit drinking 14 years ago, I didn't believe in anything or anybody. I had no spiritual life. I was dead. For all intents and purposes, I was dead. The only thing I really believed is that you can't trust anybody. I believed negative things. And at some point in my sobriety I realized believing negative things *is* a belief system, because you're believing in something that you don't actually know is going to happen. Believing in negative things is actually more difficult than believing in positive things, and they're actually both belief systems. It's not atheism to believe in negative things. You're believing in something.

PM: You're creating it, yeah.

MG: Yeah. [laughs] That belief system creates this negative person. And that's how I used to be. So as more time goes by and I start to understand myself better, and I start to understand what believing in things does to a person, my negative beliefs have slowly been replaced by positive beliefs. My belief system now is much more positive. I'll never be one for any organized religion whatsoever. I don't think you can put into dogma what I believe. It's way too ever-changing. As soon as I articulate it it's changed again. So trying to put it in writing is absurd.

PM: Would it be fair to say that you tend to believe in something greater than yourself?

MG: Absolutely. I believe in the Creator. And I believe that the source of creativity is the Creator. I believe more and more that thing that Harlan Howard used to say when people asked him about songwriting. He'd tell them, "Man, I just hold the pen."

PM: Right. That's how I've always felt. I didn't know Harlan was that way.

MG: Oh, yeah. And more and more and more as I go forward, I can see that to be true. It'd be really cool to take credit and say, "You know, I work so hard that I wrote that sucker." But I know deep down in my heart, the lines that I wrote, those are the ones that

are okay, and the great lines, well, those came through me. I was holding the pen, and there it was.

And whether or not that's true doesn't matter to me anymore. My ability to believe that it's true changes my life. So I choose to believe that it's true. And if it's proven false, well, I suppose that I'll deal with that then. But for now, I don't care if it's true or not. I believe that it's true. And that's what belief is. That's what faith is. It's not actually knowing, it's just choosing to believe. I believe that I'm being taken care of. I believe that I'm here for a reason. I don't know what the reason is. I just try to do my best with what I've got in front of me. And slowly but surely my negative beliefs are exposed to me, and slowly but surely they get replaced with positive beliefs. And it's made all the difference for me.

PM: Wow. How's your love life? Is there somebody special?

MG: Yeah, yeah. That's going great.

PM: Good for you.

MG: Yeah. I spent my first year in Nashville wondering what the hell I was doing here? It was a tough transition from Boston to Nashville. But I love the small town thing. In Boston, I loved the big city thing. And I left just about the time it was starting to really get on my nerves. But I loved it for the most part. And now the small town is just right. Whether or not the music business was here, I would like it. Being around the other songwriters is just an added plus, but I like the life in Nashville.

PM: Me too, yeah.

MG: It's cool to just get in your car and go where you're going and park your car and go inside—I mean, you can do that in Boston.

PM: And everything is ten minutes away.

MG: Yeah, everything. It's a ten-minute town.

PM: Yeah.

[laughter]

PM: So since I haven't heard the tunes from the upcoming fourth record, do you find your subject matter is changing as you roll on, or are you just going deeper into the themes for which you have become known?

MG: There are only so many things you can write about. But I find as I change internally and spiritually, and just as I get older, that things strike me differently because I'm different. So I'll revisit the same subjects with a different perspective.

PM: Right.

MG: I really am not going into any uncharted areas. I'm still straddling a lot of the same things, but maybe with a little bit of a different point of view.

PM: That makes sense to me.

MG: Yeah.

PM: What have you been reading lately?

MG: Let's see. I picked up this book at the airport that I'm just devouring. It's by Bruce Feiler, and it's called something like *Dreaming Out Loud: the Changing Face of Nashville*. It's being compared to *Mansion on the Hill* and *Hitmen*. It sort of chronicles how country music got so bad. And it makes really good sense. He has very, very good access to the players who are integral to the scene. And I'm loving it.

I just finished another book called *Dry*. It's about this guy [Augusten Burroughs] who writes really comically about going into detox. He's the ad exec. I mean, I didn't think it was funny going into detox, myself. And for him to make it funny is fun to read. [laughs] I didn't see any humor in it, you know? But reading his version of it has been great. I'm always reading something. I think it's important for me to keep new information coming in.

PM: Yeah, yeah. If you're going to be on output as much as an artist likes to be, you've got to get a lot of input, I think.

MG: Yeah, I think that's important.

PM: Since you're a creature capable of bold moves and extreme changes, are things maybe outside of music you'd like to explore or maybe attempt in the future?

MG: I never know. I never know what's next. Each day is a mystery to me. I don't know what's next. I've actually been offered the opportunity to co-write with Harlan Howard.

PM: How do you do that? [as the legend is no longer of this world—Harlan passed away in 2002]

MG: Well, Harlan used to write in bars. And he used to do a lot of writing on bar napkins.

PM: Yeah.

MG: And his widow has given me the access to boxes of stuff that Harlan wrote that hadn't been finished.

PM: Oh, my Lord!

MG: So I'm going through it and culling out stuff that I think I can finish. And I've got a couple of them done already. And I think we're going to have a CD coming up called *Bar Napkins*.

PM: Oh, my God, that's unbelievable. Thank you for sharing that with us.

MG: When I read some of these things he wrote, and I think it's just incredible how similar we are. He was thrown around social services for a number of years when he was a kid. He bounced from family to family to family, ended up on the streets and in a lot of trouble, and somehow managed to turn that horrible childhood around. And while my childhood wasn't as bad as his, I too went through a couple of families, and ran away, and was adopted, and lived in halfway houses. So we have that similar past, and it just led to a lot of the similar experiences. I love going through the stuff and finding these diamonds, these gems.

PM: Wow.

MG: So that's what I've been up to lately, in my free time, is deciphering these bar napkins. He wrote with his left hand with a felt tip pen on a bar napkin when he was drinking. So it's really like reading hieroglyphics. Like, is that an "e," is that an "i," is that...? [laughs]

PM: Do you mean he was a right-handed person but he wrote with his wrong hand.

MG: No, he wrote always left-handed, but it's that different kind of slant that a left-handed person writes with.

PM: Right.

MG: And of course, he was slammin' down White Russians and writing on bar napkins with a pen that bleeds ink all over the place.

PM: [laughs]

MG: So it's a slow process, but I'm glad it's slow. I don't want this to go fast. I'm savoring it.

PM: What a unique opportunity. That's really beautiful.

MG: Isn't that cool? I'm very honored to be able to say that I'm doing that.

PM: Is there something about you that you think even your fans may not know or understand?

MG: Oh, man, it's all out there. It's in the songs. There's nothing left to tell.

[laughter]

MG: If I have any secrets, I don't even know.

PM: Well, Mary, we must get together sometime when you're back in town. We've talked about it before, but I really want to do it.

MG: Well, let's do it, man. I'm not doing anything until the record comes out in September. This is probably my last string of shows.

PM: Okay. Thanks so much for your time today. I really enjoyed talking with you.

MG: Oh, sure. I appreciate it. See you soon.